

# BABINDA

## Economic Development Plan



Prepared for Cairns Regional Council by  
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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Background

Cairns Regional Council commissioned Cummings Economics to research and prepare a Strategy and Plan for Economic Development for Babinda.

## 1.2. Geographical Background

The Babinda district covers the coastal valley from Deeral South to the Russell River and the Woopen Creek area, the coastal range south of Russell Heads and the Bramston Beach area.

Babinda has some of the most spectacular scenery in Australia. This is Australia's highest rainfall area – an area of great botanical diversity. Beautiful creeks and rivers come down from the mountains, wind their way through the cane fields and join in a broad waterway that breaks through the coast hills to the sea. Offshore are the Frankland Islands and Great Barrier Reef.

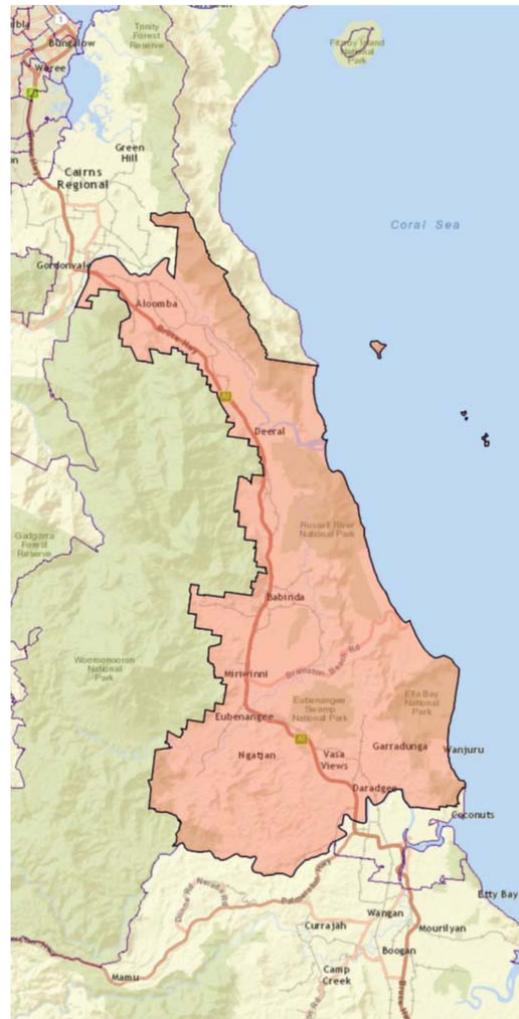
For the purposes of this study, the area covered is represented by Statistical Area Level 2 Babinda. The Babinda Statistical Area Level 2 (SA2) has a total area of 671.4 km<sup>2</sup>, with an average daily temperature range of 20.2 °C to 28.1 °C and an average rainfall of 4,014 mm each year.

## 1.3. Economic Background

The foundation industry in the area, the sugar industry, has achieved great productivity gains in recent decades but bringing with it strong rationalisation, loss of workforce needed and in 2011, closure of the Babinda Sugar Mill.

The area's cane was assigned partially to Mulgrave Mill and partially to South Johnstone Mill. The district appears to have held its population remarkably well following the mill closure. However, a drop in money circulating in the town has been observed, with a number of long standing businesses under economic stress and a local charity reporting reductions in donations received.

In the Babinda area, in more recent decades, some diversification into other cropping, especially bananas, has taken place and some rise in tourism earnings that are still quite small.



Unfortunately for the area, it is cut off from the coast by the coastal hills (only Bramston Beach is accessible by road), and missed out on participating in the major uplift in the region's economy brought by tourism from the 1970s onwards. In fact, competition from the Mossman/Daintree /Cape Tribulation area saw some aspects decline since the 1990s.

Like many rural towns, Babinda has town facilities that can service a greater population than the present population.

In 1996 the population in Babinda peaked at 4,507. Since that time the population has declined slightly, dropping to 4,154 in 2015.

The population in Babinda has been ageing. Between 2001 and 2015, the proportion of people in the 50yr+ age group has increased by 14.8%. Numbers in the 75yr+ age group have increased dramatically from 189 in 2001 to 340 in 2015.

Babinda has a relatively high Indigenous population. According to the 2011 Census, 9% of the Babinda population is Indigenous. In comparison, 3.6% of the population of Queensland is Indigenous.

Babinda residents' employment in 2011 was heavily dominated by agriculture and manufacturing (31%), although the mill was closed earlier that year, emphasising the importance of farming and the sugar industry. This was followed by the government services (safety, education and health). Wholesale and retail was relatively low at 12%.



### POPULATION

- **4,154** = Estimated Resident Population (ERP) as at 30 June 2015



### GROWTH

- **-0.7%** = Average annual growth rate over five years
- **-0.3%** = Average annual growth rate of over ten years



### DEMOGRAPHICS

- **18.1%** aged 0–14 years as at 30 June 2015
- **63.2%** aged 15–64 years
- **18.7%** aged 65+ years
- **46.7 years** = Median age as at 30 June 2015

## 1.4. Why Is It Important

The Babinda district, along with the Gordonvale district, is essentially a rural area attached for local government administrative purposes to the major regional city of Cairns. These rural areas can have different needs and priorities to the urban area. However their population is equivalent to Douglas Shire and other shires that devote substantial resources to promotion of tourism and economic development.

### IMPLICATIONS

- Babinda has been gradually declining in population and the challenge is to turn that around.
- In terms of community social facilities, there is a need for catering for an increase in ageing population. In Babinda, there is a special need to cater for those aged 75 plus.
- Apart from developing local employment, Babinda's need for population growth can be accelerated by actions like provision of public transport.
- Past underlying factors shaping the area's economy are likely to continue into the future including continuing spread of urban Cairns into the Gordonvale/Trinity area and progressively with effects on Babinda.

# 2. STRATEGY FRAMEWORK

## 2.1 Three Levels of Strategy

The strategy has three levels:

1. Stimulation of activities that earn income from outside the area like agriculture, tourism and some other industry and services;
2. Improvement of the service structure of the towns; and
3. Connectivity with Cairns.

As Babinda is suffering a decline in population and income, stimulation of activities that earn income from outside the area is paramount along with locating population in the area.

For tourism, the strategy in the Babinda area is aimed at raising awareness of existing, mainly rainforest and town-related attractions and their development in the short run, but in the long run, also bringing the potential of the coast, waterways and proximity to the Great Barrier Reef more into focus.

Strategies are needed to support potential for further agricultural development.

Strategies for improving connectivity with Cairns are heavily focused on public transport.

## 2.2 Three Broad Fields of Action

There are three broad fields of action:

- A need for marketing of the area – not just to tourists but as a place to invest, to do business and to live.
- A need for investment in product development:
  - In tourism, in agriculture, industry and services that earn income from outside the region,
  - In services that impinge on investing and doing business and living in the area.
- A need for governmental framework involvement and cooperation - local, state and federal that encourages economic progress.

# 3. MARKETING

## 3.1 General and Tourism

### 3.1.1. Role of Council

While much marketing relating to economic development of an area is undertaken by non-government entities, there is a need for Council, on behalf of the community:

- To play a strategic role in its own right;
- To assist business and local efforts;
- To use its influence with other levels of government to achieve plans and objectives.

### 3.1.2. Need to lift area's "presence"

There are substantial areas in which the 'presence' of the area in various fields (in tourism, for investment, for doing business, for residence) is below what could be expected given the area's location, potential and also its level of population compared with many other rural areas. The marketing element of the strategy and plan aims to lift that presence.

Council should work with local stakeholders and Tourism Tropical North Queensland to identify Babinda tourism product (existing and potential) and provide input to and recommendations on marketing activities.

It is important to ensure that Babinda and surrounding regions are included in the tourism marketing and content distribution strategy for Tropical North Queensland. Content should be delivered across all relevant tourism assets including websites, blog, social media platforms and domestic and international campaign activity.

### 3.1.3. Marketing names

It is suggested to adopt a name for the Council area south of the city around which images can be built for tourism, investment, business and residence. Having selected a name, slogans or

marketing tag lines could be adopted. There is a need to consider names/slogans/tag lines to be developed identifying that Babinda is also a good place to visit and live.

#### 3.1.4. Signage

There is a need to improve basic signage through the area with Cairns Regional Council to play a key role, but also to influence relevant Queensland Government departments.

#### 3.1.5. Brochure material

This part of the strategy involves production of brochures and visitor guiding material. Council has recently produced a Babinda brochure. It is suggested that a visitor guide to cover the southern areas of the city, both Babinda and Gordonvale, could be put together with advertising support, especially aimed at road-borne visitors that comprehensively covers the area.

#### 3.1.6. Websites

It is suggested that any brochure and visitor guiding material that is developed be reflected where possible in the Council website and other applicable promotional websites, such as the region's official tourism website [www.cairnsgreatbarrierreef.org.au](http://www.cairnsgreatbarrierreef.org.au) (TTNQ).

#### 3.1.7. Visitor Information Centres

Visitor Information Centres are vital to marketing the region. The Babinda Visitor Information Centre is working well. In recent times, there has been an increase and upgrading of accommodation availability in Babinda. A proposal has been developed by the Babinda Visitor Information Centre and local businesses to encourage short stays in Babinda. This will need to be considered in development of marketing material.

### 3.2 Business and Industry

It is proposed that the sections of Council's website and/or printed materials that deal with investment, business and residence be upgraded to include special references and information on Babinda and the area south of the city.

### 3.3 Media

It is proposed that Cairns Regional Council, TTNQ and Advance Cairns take opportunities to build up the "presence" of the area in the media in relation to tourism, investment, business and residence.

#### **IMPLICATIONS:**

- **Tourism is important to Babinda.**
- **Compared with other areas along the Far North Tropical Coast, the area is relatively under-developed for tourism.**
- **Tourism trends will make the areas south of Cairns increasingly attractive for some tourism market segments seeking a non-urban, more natural environment, less crowded by visitors and less commercialised.**

# 4. PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT

## 4.1 Tourism

### 4.1.1. Boulders

The critical strategy here is to keep investing in safety and presentational experiences at the Boulders as the number one recreational/tourism product in the area. Council's Babinda Boulders Master Plan builds on many of the existing site elements and introduces new components that aim to improve the way the precinct functions and the visitor experience.



The Plan focuses on maintaining the natural character of the precinct, while rationalising spaces, increasing the capacity to cater for greater numbers of users and improving safety. The Plan recognises that the Boulders Precinct relies on the natural beauty to attract tourists and locals alike, and seeks to facilitate this.

Extension over time is proposed to:

1. Develop the Boulders as a lowland rainforest walking hub.
2. Establish guided walks and other facilities.
3. Progressively expand the accommodation opportunities in the area.

The first step is to negotiate a short and long term plan between Cairns Regional Council and National Parks with Traditional Owner input.

### 4.1.2. Babinda tourism features

The strategic need is to provide a reason for more of those going to the Boulders and more of the visitors travelling along the highway to stop at Babinda. A number of possible features have been suggested and there is a need for a plan to select and develop these features.

### 4.1.3. RV Parks (Boulders and Babinda Rotary Park)

The Babinda RV initiative has been very successful and there has been demonstrated demand for this activity in this region. Ongoing improvements to existing sites should be considered to further enhance the visitor experience.

### 4.1.4. Walking trails and National Parks facilities

A long-term plan needs to be developed to enhance or extend existing walking trails in the area. This includes development of guided tours and other facilities, such as camping and

accommodation in the area. As most of the walking trails are in National Parks, it will be necessary to work with the Department of National Parks, Sport and Racing on this.

#### 4.1.5. Bellenden Ker

The great amphitheatre of dense rainforest mountainsides rising up to the peak of Bellenden Ker, right next to the Bruce Highway, is one of the most visually spectacular sights in the region. While there is open track access to the peaks of Bartle Frere and the Pyramid, the peak of Bellenden Ker remains closed. It is proposed that the possibility of opening up a walking track to the peak and developing the cableway for tourism purposes be explored.

There is an existing cableway facility at Bellenden Ker to service the communications facility at the peak. Development of the cableway track access for tourism purposes could have the potential to be an important addition to the regional tourism product. It is notable that Bellenden Ker peak does not have open walking track access. As the cableway is privately owned, development of the cableway would be a matter for the owner and any potential private investors, but could be explored further.

#### 4.1.6. Coast and waterways

One of the major reasons the area has not participated more in tourism in the past has been lack of access to and development of accommodation along the coast. The waterways, coast and reef are already an important recreational fishing area. It is proposed that investigation be launched in due course into the long-term potential of the coastline for tourism development, including Bramston Beach.

#### 4.1.7. Festivals and events

Festivals and events are an important driver of economic growth. There is potential to build on the Babinda Harvest Festival to increase promotion and attendance. Consideration could be given to develop a second major event for Babinda.



#### 4.1.8. Sports tourism

Sports tourism is developing as an opportunity in the region. The proposed Waterski Park at Babinda could attract regional and inter-regional events that would generate demand for local accommodation. Where possible, support should be provided to grow this developing opportunity.

## 4.2 Agricultural Development and Diversification

### 4.2.1. General

Plentiful rainfall and year-round warmth means that the area has one of the highest levels of 'plant growth potential' in Australia.

The strategy in relation to agriculture is to:

1. Hold on to the sugar industry and encourage additional processing and use of its biomass production resources;
2. Encourage other diversified agricultural production and processing;
3. Maximise cross-linkages of the agricultural sector with tourism, including nurseries and gardens.

### 4.2.2. Sugar by-product processing

The sugar milling industry is moving into a major new phase where it will produce more than raw sugar and molasses and invest in a range of other income earning streams including co-generation, biofuels, bioplastics and act as a centre for processing other crops. Proposals have been developed to establish in the Babinda area, biomass production of electricity and other products based partly on sugar cane trash. It is proposed that Council should assist where possible to bring these kinds of projects to fruition.

### 4.2.3. Development of other crops and processing

It is proposed that Council assist where possible the continuation and further development of other crops and processing through:

- Highlighting the range of crops produced in the area;
- Supporting the development of new crops and their processing;
- Encouraging linkages with tourism with a special emphasis on nurseries and gardens.

As part of development of diversified production in the area, special attention will need to be given to transportation, including opportunities to ship overseas via airfreight facilities at Cairns Airport and through container shipping.

It is proposed that Cairns Regional Council stand ready to provide suitable incentives, where there is a substantial economic benefit to the community relative to costs, and where assistance is likely to help tip the balance to enable projects to proceed.

### 4.3 Manufacturing and Industry

Encouragement for manufacturing and other activity located on industrial land will be mainly through ensuring a plentiful supply of properly zoned industrial land. The former mill land at Babinda provides this. Provision of support and incentives that stimulate industry and employment should be considered. This should include on-going liaison with other levels of government.



### 4.4 Services

It is proposed that Council, where appropriate, incentivise the development of retirement village/aged care facilities in Babinda. This may also result in the development of improved local medical centre facilities.

### 4.5 Connectivity with Cairns

Council's "Our Cairns" survey (2016) indicates connectivity as a high priority for Babinda and smaller centres through to Aloomba. There is a need for public transport access to city services for residents without their own transport.

Cairns Regional Council is considering light rail connectivity from suburbs into the airport and CBD. It is proposed that this be paralleled with an examination of feasibility of a rail motor service, or a bus service, into the city at suitable hours from Babinda, and possibly, for viability, from Innisfail. Part of this proposal should relate to possible tourism usage.

Council will soon develop a Discussion Paper on the Future Sustainable Public Transport Options for Cairns Regional Council Area. This Paper will consider long-term public transport solutions for the Cairns Region including Babinda.

### 4.6 Business Development

It is proposed that an effort be made to ensure that services available in Cairns to assist businesses in their management are extended through to the business communities in Babinda, eg Chamber of Commerce and Industry Queensland programs currently being offered, and Council's Urban Spaces Program.

# 5. GOVERNMENT FRAMEWORK

## 5.1 Development and Investment Incentives

The delivery of the strategy outlined will, in part, depend on a willingness to flexibly incentivise desirable developments where economic benefits very clearly outweigh costs and where incentives will make a difference. Development fees and charges will be reviewed to further incentivise development.

## 5.2 Other Levels of Government

It is proposed that Cairns Regional Council take a proactive approach and seek State Government involvement in implementation of the Strategy.

## 5.3 Rural residential

To help increase population in the Babinda area, it is recommended that the possibility be investigated of allowing rural residential development in appropriate areas not endangering the viability of cropping.

# 6. IMPLEMENTATION

It is recommended that a special committee / working group be set up to meet regularly to oversee the implementation of this Plan including representatives of Cairns Regional Council, the Babinda Chamber of Commerce, Babinda Taskforce and community organisations.

### Priorities

1. Short term (within 6 months)
2. Medium term (within 18 months)
3. Long term (within 24 months)

	<u>Priority</u>	<u>Partners</u>
<b>PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT</b>		
<b>Tourism</b>		
Execute the remaining elements of the Master Plan for the Boulders.	1	CRC
Ongoing improvements are undertaken at existing RV	2	CRC

sites.		
Seek with Queensland National Parks, the development of a trail development strategy for the Babinda area.	2	CRC, DNPSR, TTNQ
Further develop and promote the Babinda Harvest Festival and other events.	2	CRC, TTNQ
In association with Queensland National Parks and traditional owners, develop long-term coordinated Development Plan for the Boulders.	3	CRC, DNPSR, TTNQ, BCC
Explore opportunities for a cableway in the Babinda area.	3	BCC
Consider options to support further tourism development of coastline, including Bramston Beach.	3	CRC, TTNQ, BCC, BVIC
<b>Agriculture, Manufacturing , Business and Industry</b>		
Assistance in ensuring that business education and assistance programs are extended to the Babinda community.	1	CRC, CCIQ, BCC, BT
Ongoing liaison with agriculture, processing and industry sectors to help achieve development.	2	CRC, TTNQ, DSD, BCC, BT
Consider roll out of Councils Urban Spaces of program in Babinda.	2	CRC, BCC, BT
<b>Services</b>		
Incentivise development, where appropriate e.g. retirement village/aged care facilities Babinda.	3	CRC, DSD
<b>MARKETING</b>		
Host a workshop with tourism operators and interested parties to identify key attributes, possible names and future tourism potential of the Region.	1	TTNQ, BCC, BT, BVIC
Ensure Babinda and surrounding regions are included in the marketing and content distribution strategy for Tropical North Queensland.	2	CRC, TTNQ
<b>CONNECTIVITY</b>		
Investigate rail or bus public transport services from Babinda into Cairns.	2	CRC
<b>GOVERNMENT FRAMEWORK</b>		
Proactively seek State Government involvement in implementation of the Strategy.	1	CRC, DSD, DNPSR
Review development fees and charges	1	CRC
Provide suitable incentives to support industry development.	2	CRC, DSD
Investigate possibilities of rural residential development	3	CRC

**Partners:**

Cairns Regional Council (CRC)  
 Tourism Tropical North Queensland (TTNQ)  
 Babinda Chamber of Commerce (BCC)  
 Babinda Taskforce (BT)

Babinda Visitor Information Centre (BVIC)  
 Department of National Parks, Sport and Racing (DNPSR)  
 Department of State Development (DSD)