BABINDA
Economic Development Plan

Prepared for Cairns Regional Council by
Cummings Economics
www.cummings.net.au
1. INTRODUCTION

Background
Cairns Regional Council commissioned Cummings Economics to research and prepare a Strategy and Plan for Economic Development for Babinda in 2017. The following updates the Plan to 2019.

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 km², with an average daily temperature range of 20.2 °C to 28.1 °C and an average rainfall of 4,014 mm each year.

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. The population then declined, dropping to 4,213 in 2014. Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicates that since then, it has recovered marginally to 4,304 in 2018.

The population in Babinda has been ageing. Between 2001 and 2018, the proportion of people in the 50yr+ age group has increased by 15.9%. Numbers in the 75yr+ age group have increased strongly from 189 in 2001 to 327 in 2017.

Babinda has a relatively high Indigenous population. According to the 2016 Census, 7% of the Babinda population is Indigenous. In comparison, 4% of the population of Queensland is Indigenous.

### POPULATION
- **4,304** = Estimated Resident Population (ERP) as at 30 June 2018

### GROWTH
- **+0.2%** = Average annual growth rate over five years
- **(-0.2%)** = Average annual growth rate over ten years

### DEMOGRAPHICS
- **16.5%** aged 0–14 years as at 30 June 2017
- **63.4%** aged 15–64 years
- **20.1%** aged 65+ years
- **47 years** = Median age as at 30 June 2016 Census

### Why Is It Important

The Babinda district, along with the Gordonvale district, is largely rural that can have different needs and priorities to the major urban area of Cairns as a city.

However, their population is more than Douglas Shire and other shires that devote substantial resources to promotion of tourism and economic development.

### IMPLICATIONS
- Babinda has declined in population over time and been almost stagnant in recent years. The challenge is to maintain and grow population.
- 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.

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:

- The need for marketing of the area – not just to tourists but as a place to invest, to do business and to live.
- The 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.
- The need for a 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. Qantas has recently developed and is playing on its flights, a video relating to its carbon offset support for tree planting in the area by Jaragun. Consideration needs to be given to how to leverage this initiative.

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 would need to 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

Council has produced a Babinda brochure. A visitor guiding brochure has been produced covering the southern areas of the city, both Babinda and Gordonvale especially aimed at road visitors. These brochures need to be kept up to date and production continued.

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.tropicalnorthqueensland.org.au (TTNQ).
3.1.7. Visitor Information Centres

Visitor Information Centres are vital to marketing the region. The council has long provided financial and in-kind support for the operation of the Babinda Visitor Information Centre and this should continue. The Babinda 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 to include special references and information on Babinda.

3.3 Media

It is proposed that Cairns Regional Council, TTNQ and other appropriate organisations take opportunities to build up the “presence” of the area in the media in relation to tourism, investment, business and residence.

3.4 Film Industry

The Babinda area provides locations for various types of film productions such as the recent Qantas feature. There is a need to encourage and promote this activity.

**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.

A recent meeting of Council and community representatives with Tourism Minister, Kate Jones, has indicated that special funding may become available for a substantial expansion of track and other infrastructure at the Boulders.

There is a need for Council to assist with two levels of action:

1) The preparation, in cooperation with Queensland National Parks, of a viable plan for expansion of the tracks and facilities at the Boulders;
2) The development of proposals to attract outside funding for the purpose.

The Plan

The development of the Plan will need to include National Parks and the local community representatives. Discussions indicate that it would include:

- The existing track
- The short circuit Wonga trail – 1 km
- A crossing of Babinda Creek and improved trail to give access to the waterfalls – 3 km
- An upgrade of the Goldfields Track
- Extension of the recreation area to Double Barrell Creek
- A kiosk and base for guides to conduct walks including to cave art locations in the vicinity.

National Parks Interface

The main Boulders area is under Council control. The National Parks area is to the immediate west but the Wonga Trail could include parts into the National Parks area. There would appear to be no issues with this upgrading.

There is an issue with National Parks in relation to the trail to the waterfalls. National Parks reject the idea of stepping stones across Babinda Creek because of costs of rescue if the creek rises. This will need to be resolved.

National Parks have on their program an upgrading of the Goldfields Track through to the Ranger Station at Kearneys Falls.

This includes upgrading the section from the Ranger Station to the East Mulgrave Causeway to mountain bike standard and improvement of the Causeway to Boulders section as a walking track.

It is further proposed to extend the track system by about 4km from the causeway area to include an old ‘stampers’ mining field relic. These improvements will increase the attraction of the area.
Extension of the Boulders area to Double Barrel Creek has been suggested that would appear to be outside the National Parks area.

**The Case**

The case for special tourism funding should include the following.

1) The suitability of the area as an outstanding point to experience the Wet Tropics closer to Cairns than Mossman Gorge and the Daintree, including for day trips from cruise ships.

2) The area is experiencing increased visitation. The track system envisaged will spread visitors out over three pools on Babinda Creek and more on Double Barrel Creek allowing the area to cope with greater numbers without congestion to retain its current natural, not commercialised, atmosphere.

3) A kiosk and Aboriginal guides will link in with the Jaragun carbon credits and Qantas promotion.

The Plan will be complimentary to the National Parks’ initiatives of improving the Goldfields Track and access to the old goldfields relics.

4.1.2. Babinda township attractions

The Visitor Information Centre continues to operate well and needs to be continued.

The Babinda Creek RV park continues to prove a valuable source of business for the town but with some reported problems of some visitors overstaying and degrading the experience for others. Arrangements to administer need to be reviewed.

There is an opportunity to make an entrance statement for the town. There seems to be some measure of agreement that a special symbol for the town (equivalent to Tully’s “Golden Gumboot”), should be a “Big Umbrella” including shade and a rain gauge. A desire has been expressed to have a “streetscape” plan with street furniture, ornaments, wall art, historical and indigenous markers and better treatment of powerlines. There is a need for Council to liaise with the community on these matters.

Limited museum development is underway as a start and is being assisted by the Cairns Historical Museum. Some assistance may be needed in applying for grants to support further development.

4.1.3. Other district attractions

National Parks are installing safety warnings at Josephine Falls and have plans to improve the Bartle Frere Track including lookouts along the way and at the top.

Signage on the Bramston Beach road directing to the Eubenangee Swamp lookout needs improvement and National Parks are aware of this.

There are no National Parks’ plans to upgrade the track up Bellenden Ker.

The potential for tours on the Mulgrave/ Russell Rivers (including crocodile spotting) remains untapped and can be promoted.

In the past, there has been a number of excellent award winning/ television featured private gardens in the area but this seems to have declined. The area’s rainfall conditions make it highly suitable for development of outstanding gardens.

4.1.4. Festivals and events

Festivals and events can be a contributor to 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.
The Babinda Information Centre would like to see a “Break in Babinda” promotion launched, including attendance at one of the few old picture theatres left in the region. The theatre operates on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights and greater audiences would help secure its ongoing viability.

4.1.5. Sports tourism

Sports tourism is developing as an opportunity in the region. Where possible, support should be provided to grow this 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. Carbon Offsets and tree planting

Carbon offset tree planting organised by Jaragun has become a significant activity in the district. Jaragun needs to establish a nursery for planting material and needs about two hectares for this. The question of helping find two hectares for a nursery should be considered. Another alternative would be to approach MSF to provide some of their land under suitable arrangements. It is possible that if set up in a suitable way, the nursery could become a point of visitor interest in its own right.

4.2.3. Bio industries

There have been suggestions in the past that Babinda could be a suitable location for establishment of facilities that treat green waste for various outputs. This has included bio digesters to produce bio gas, ethanol and other related products.

A study is about to be commissioned by Regional Development Australia Far North Queensland and Torres Strait to explore possibility of extending the production of fertilisers from green waste. The MSF land at Babinda might provide a suitable site location and this should be brought to the attention of those carrying out the studies.
4.2.4. 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 Other Industry

Encouragement for other industry 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, but MSF reports little interest. It is recommended that Council liaise with MSF about possible future use of this land for a range of purposes including residential.

The water bottling plant at Babinda is seeking to expand and employ more.

4.4 Services

The Abbeyfield Centre offers limited retirement living units. However, the community aged care group is keen for a full aged care facility to be developed. Council has already indicated that it has land that could be available. In association with Cootharinga Gardens, grant funding is being sought for a feasibility study to attract investment. Council should stand ready to assist if needed in this process.

4.5 Connectivity with Cairns

Council’s “Our Cairns” survey indicated 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.

It is recommended Council continue to pursue this matter.
4.6 Property Development to attract population

Babinda needs additional population to sustain and grow the level of services available. Babinda offers lifestyle and cost of living advantages including lower Council rates and charges than Cassowary Coast.

There is reported to be a good demand for house allotments if the price is below $100,000. Council has land along Pollard Road that could be made available for lot development in a location where water, power and telecommunication services could be easily extended. It was reported that builders had shown interest in building spec houses for sale and a good rental market was reported. It is recommended that in the interests of achieving population growth, Council investigate the availability of private and council land for residential development.

Opportunities for rural residential sales were reported with demand for 2 and 5 ha lots. It is recommended that the possibility be investigated to amend town planning in future regional planning reviews:

- a) To allow existing rural properties to split off a separate residential lot, especially to accommodate family members or property workers.
- b) To allow rural residential allotments in suitable areas not likely to affect viability of local rural industries and too small for viable agricultural production.

MSF Sugar could also be encouraged to look at staged development of the old mill site starting with a residential component.

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, or where the size of the lot is not conducive to viable agricultural production and use.
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 other relevant stakeholders.

Priorities

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

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<tr>
<th>Priority</th>
<th>Partners</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Product Development</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Tourism</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Support operations of the Babinda Visitor Information Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ongoing development of the Boulders area and related National Parks areas including development of proposals for outside funding.</td>
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<td>Ongoing promotion and improvements as required at existing RV sites.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liaise with Queensland National Parks regarding ongoing improvement of trails in the Babinda area.</td>
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<td>Further develop and promote the Babinda Harvest Festival and other events.</td>
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<td>Consider options to support further tourism development of coastline.</td>
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<td>Support the development of an entrance statement that reflects community aspirations.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Liaise with community to improve town attractiveness to visitors including streetscapes, feature structures, museum development and entrance statements.</td>
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<p>| Agriculture, Business, Industry and Services |       |
| Assistance in ensuring that business education and assistance programs are extended to the Babinda community. | 1 | CRC, BCC, BT |
| Ongoing liaison with industry sectors to help achieve development. | 3 | CRC, TTNQ, DSD, BCC, BT |
| Ongoing liaison with and support for the Babinda Taskforce and the Babinda Chamber of Commerce. | 3 | CRC, BCC, BT |</p>
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Services</th>
<th>Priority</th>
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<tr>
<td>Support feasibility investigations and industry development eg. new retirement or aged care facilities.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>CRC, DSD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Improvement of public facilities and services.</td>
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<td>CRC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
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<td>Engage interested parties to identify key attributes and future tourism potential of the Region including consideration of leveraging recent Qantas promotional material relating to the area.</td>
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<td>TTNQ, BCC, BT, BVIC</td>
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<td>Ensure Babinda and surrounding regions are included in the marketing and content distribution strategy for Tropical North Queensland.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>CRC, TTNQ</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encourage and support film and photography activities.</td>
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<td>CRC, TTNQ</td>
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<td>Connectivity</td>
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<td>Investigate public transport services from Babinda into Cairns.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>CRC</td>
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<td>Government Framework</td>
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<tr>
<td>Proactively seek State Government involvement in implementation of the Strategy.</td>
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<td>CRC, DSD, DES</td>
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<tr>
<td>Provide suitable support for industry development.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>CRC, DSD</td>
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<td>Investigate possibilities of further residential allotment development in the area including urban and where appropriate, currently zoned rural land.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>CRC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investigate and support opportunities in relation to carbon offset programs.</td>
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<td>CRC, BT</td>
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**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 Environment and Science (DES)
Department of State Development, Manufacturing, Infrastructure and Planning (DSD)