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City Airports to Airport Cities

Introduction

The role, scale and meaning of major urban airports worldwide have changed over the past decade as a result of corporate and economic transformation. Modern airports are very different from traditional airports, and the current issues surrounding airport development and expansion need to be defined by an understanding of the complex roles and relationships now associated with airports.

Kasarda (2001), believes airports are the fifth wave of urban development evolving from the history of transport induced urban growth. Major cities developed around seaports and waterways for hundreds of years. Railways in the 18th and 19th centuries opened up new lands, followed by the development of highways and freeways in the 20th century. In the 21st century, Kasarda claims that major gateway airports are generating spatial concentrations of commercial activities that are leading to a new aviation linked urban form: the aerotropolis.

What may be easily recognised in Australia, is that airports are fast becoming major business centres, underpinned by various privatisation strategies. The Commonwealth government has leased large urban and regional airports to private corporations and syndicates, and since the late 1990s these entities have been well placed to benefit from the business and developer demand for airport-related and broader commercial development. In the process, airports have shifted from 'public good' transport interchange nodes to profit oriented commercial ventures where aviation revenue is now only a part of the airport 'business'. From a wider metropolitan perspective they are emerging as important sub-regional activity centres with growing complexity of land use, infrastructure, transport, environmental impacts and implications and stakeholder relations.

As a result of such changes, airport impacts now pose considerable challenges for both airport operators and the surrounding urban and regional environment. The airport can no longer be managed in isolation from the metropolis that it serves.

In Australia, issues that are currently being faced include:

- environmental - impacts (space, noise and emissions) and resource use;
- related to infrastructure – inadequate and inequitable provision;

- related to economy – inefficiencies and duplication of commercial investments;
- related to governance - inert decision-making, poor coordination between levels of government, and conflict between jurisdictions;
- related to transport – localised congestion, isolation of planning strategies; and
- related to land-use – conflicts and competition between airports and surrounding urban areas.

Airports Act 1996

Due to lessee arrangements of the privatisation of airports in Australia, airports are presently governed under the Airports Act 1996. This Federal legislation sets out the responsibilities and objects of airport development, regulation, ownership and obligations of airport-lessee companies. Whilst the requirements of the Act are comprehensive, it does not require the airport-lessee company to have explicit regard to State or Local planning regulations within their master planning or major development plans. This has resulted in conflict in several cities across Australia.

Under the Act, the Federal government is the regulatory body for the assessment of airport development. These powers have the potential to affect the very form and function of all cities. In its *unwillingness* to cede development controls of airports to State and Local authorities, the Federal government has implemented a de facto national urban policy. It is then the responsibility of the Commonwealth government to ensure that this opportunity for national urban policy collaboration with the State and Local governments is fully explored.

Airport Land Development

It must be realised that airports cannot profit just by landing planes, and they must have alternate sources of revenue. Therefore, the development of airport lands for non aeronautical purposes is inevitable. The planning challenge is to affect the land uses at the airport so that the changes harmonise with the local and regional planning strategies.

The argument, from the objectors of development on airport land, is that it must be evaluated and assessed under the same State and Local planning and development regulations that any other developer is required to follow. The counter argument is that airports have always been under Federal legislation as they are areas of national importance for the economic growth of the country. It may stand to reason that the national importance of airports is related to the business of aviation, as global gateways. If airports wish to continue to be regulated by Federal legislation, the developments proposed, within their boundaries, must also be of national significance.

Alternatively, it could be argued that there is a need to plan, zone and designate land use in the local area and region to support and promote the aviation industry. This

State and Local cooperation may be a means of realising an airport's full potential as a global gateway and economic generator, rather than land locking and limiting the potential of this multi-billion dollar critical infrastructure investment. It is important to recognise that profitability and survival of the major international airports, in our capital cities, is vital to the economic performance of not just the region, but the entire state and nation. If airports need to diversify their interests to remain viable, then they must do so, but in a coordinated and cooperative manner, recognising the needs of the airport, the region, the state and the nation.

There is a need to establish research, comment and debate as a means of informing the development of innovative policy and management practices for all stakeholders involved in airport development. Simultaneous consideration of urban issues and institutional responses to airport development are needed from airport-lessee companies, all tiers of government, industry partners, the regional community and importantly, the Planning Institute of Australia. Together they must begin to develop coordinated and cooperative infrastructure, land-use and transport plans for the greater benefit of all, moving away from the current inert and isolated decision making processes.

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References

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