

A View from the EDGE
Issues in Rural and Fringe Metropolitan Planning
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Planning for Sydney's Food Security

The policy response to planning for Sydney's food security has been planning policy and regulation, but there is a need to balance these mechanisms with incentives, economic development initiatives and farming infrastructure while also encouraging community engagement, communication and education. There is also a need to identify the linkages as can be seen in figure 1.

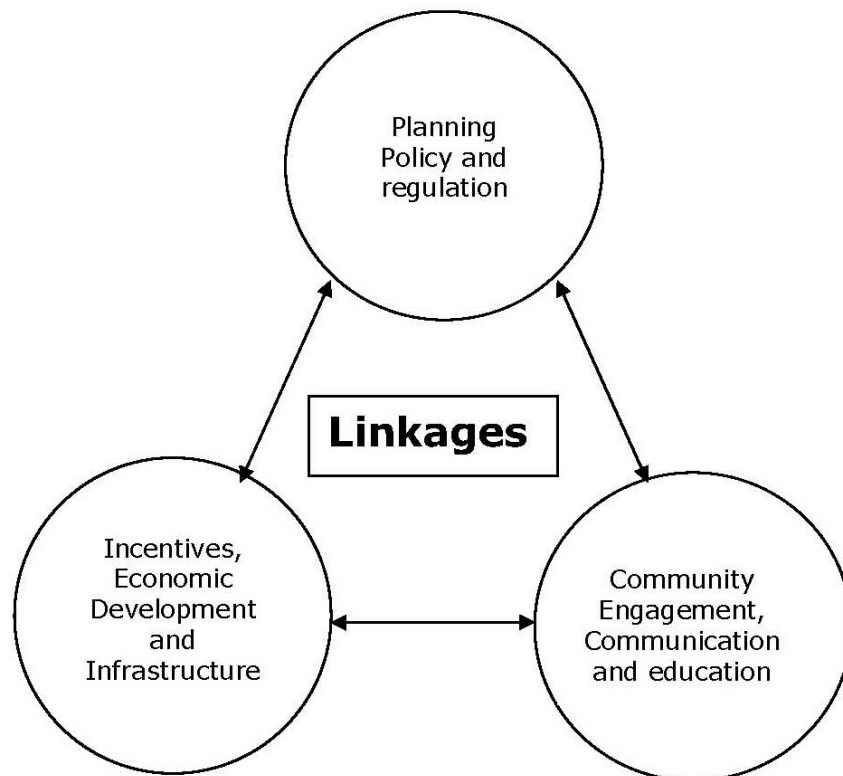


Figure 1: Policy Response to Planning for Food Security

Zoning and land-use regulations are the principal method of controlling the development of land.

Right to Farm legislation is an attempt to protect farming operations from objections about loss of amenity from rural residential users in the vicinity. It is used in the United States to give farmers the right to continue farming as long as they are carrying out 'good management practices'.

Density bonuses mean that an application for rural residential use can be varied so that part of the land involved can be retained for farming, while the allowable density for residential use in the remainder of the land that is the subject of the application is raised to compensate.

Incentives, including purchase and transfer of development rights / credits exist in the United States. Purchase of development rights or credits can be used where land is declared to be in a preservation zone and kept for agricultural purposes. A farmer can sell the development rights or credits to a government or non-government organisation. In return, a covenant is taken out over the land to ensure that the land is used only for agricultural purposes.

The rights / credits from farmland can also be purchased and transferred by developers who wish to gain an increase in the development potential of land in a development zone (usually an urban area). Governments or non-government organisations can also establish a bank of such rights or credits, so that buying and selling can take place, as is the case with water entitlements. The process depends on establishing an effective market in such rights. It has been applied to heritage buildings and increase of floorspace (City of Sydney) and biodiversity preservation (NSW BioBanking Scheme).

Council rates are one of the largest single outlays for an agricultural producer. Rate charges are based on land value, and can range from \$2,000 to \$20 000 or more. As rural land becomes more desirable for rural residential use, land values increase, with a corresponding impact on rates. The farming community has borne this cost, often without a commensurate increase in the value of production. This creates a fundamental inequity between urban and rural areas where residents of urban areas adjoining rural land pay much less (in the order of \$500 to \$800) and have many more services than people living in adjacent rural areas.

Economic development initiatives are also used to ensure that farming can continue, thereby providing for food security. These initiatives include farm gate sales agritourism, farmers' markets, local branding and incentives for farmers to deal directly with restaurateurs.

There is a need to ensure that there is sufficient infrastructure to allow agriculture to continue. This includes water as well as access to produce stores, farm machinery dealership, mechanics, transport (road, rail and air), access to consultants and other professionals as well as a workforce.

There is also a need to engage with the community to make them aware of the importance and benefits of farmland. Connections can be made between urban agriculture and the community. Education is useful in overcoming misconceptions about the idyllic rural lifestyle sought by those moving to the country from urban areas. Restaurants can promote fresh food from nearby sources. Initiatives in agritourism, such as the wine and food festivals (Manly) and musical events and concerts in the vineyards in the Hunter Valley and Wingecarribee are also useful in promoting community awareness of local agricultural production. Community gardens can also be established in urban areas.

An effective policy response to planning for food security has to include all of these matters. In the Sydney region a number of things can be done. The best land can be identified and zoned and incentives can be applied to the land to ensure that it can be retained in the long term. Also, links can be made between these farms and the local restaurant industry and farmers markets. There could also be a farm gate trail set up to promote this. A locally grown scheme could be set up and be promoted by local cafes and restaurants to promote the local farming. In new residential estates, land could be set aside for community gardens like it is done for parks.

If all of this is done, there should be a future for Sydney's food security. If nothing is done the supply of food will be less secure, which is unsustainable.