



BUSINESS February 9, 2018 Jazmin 0

IS THIS TOWNSVILLE'S TIPPING POINT?

Share icons: eye 1.12K, comment, like, dislike, progress bar, thumbs up 0, thumbs down 0, MORE ▼

There's no denying that Townsville has been strapped into a rollercoaster ride of dizzying highs and gut churning lows in recent years. However, 2018 may be the turning point for Townsville's future. A change in mindset and expectation seems to be sweeping over our city with business leaders more ready and willing than ever to take back control of our future. We sat down with five local business leaders to gain an insight into their thoughts on what we've come through, where we are and where we're heading.

HOW DID WE GET TO THIS POINT?

You can't talk about the diverse and intricate fabric that Townsville is made up of without first acknowledging that we've had a few hard years. However, one point that is largely overlooked is the fact that several undoubtable positives came out of those years.

"Townsville missed out on the major part of the Global Financial Crisis largely on the back of the resources boom," says Pat Brady, Executive Director of [Premise](#) and Chairman of the [Mater Hospital](#). "Our pain since that time has come on the back of those sources receding combined with a couple of other sectors that dropped off in performance."

Stephen Motti, Senior Principal at [Brazier Motti](#), adds to this, saying, "It allowed us to look at our strengths and become more adaptive and agile."

What made the downturn so hard to handle for a lot of residents was also the boom we were seeing before it, with [Knight Frank](#) Managing Director, Craig Stack, correctly acknowledging that we were seeing wages rise to a level that simply wasn't sustainable.

[Townsville Airport](#) Chief Operating Officer, and [Townsville Enterprise](#) Chair Kevin Gill, builds on this, "In some way, the boom beforehand was the boom we didn't need."

So why did we need to have it? Well, Stephen Motti's view is that the dip in confidence over the past two years forced us to open our eyes and redefine what our city's important attributes are. "It's important to recognise that no one has been sitting on their hands. It has been a period of reassessment, which

So why did we need to have it? Well, Stephen Motti's view is that the dip in confidence over the past two years forced us to open our eyes and redefine what our city's important attributes are. "It's important to recognise that no one has been sitting on their hands. It has been a period of reassessment, which allowed people to pursue what's needed. Those quieter times made us look at our strengths and adapt."

The tough times not only brought our expectations back to reality, they also allowed us to hone in on our region's most important sectors. One of these being agriculture, which adopted several innovative measures when challenging circumstances arose.

"North Queensland's not the only area dealing with climate change, but it's a real chance for us to try and push innovation to still have production happening," Craig Stack says. "The farmers are innovating with water and doing even better than what they've done before with 40% of the water."

Pat Brady agrees, saying, "There are small farmers and traditional farmers moving towards a more corporatised market. That brings with it a willingness to invest in new technology and strategies, which has opportunity written all over it."

IS NEGATIVE TALK THE REASON WE'RE STRUGGLING?

It's been far too easy to jump on the negative bandwagon lately, with Kevin Gill nailing down one important aspect – the 'toxic' cycle of social media and those feeding off it are harming our city.

"Those types of people are just negative, they're not representative of Townsville. They may look representative because it's so easy and it's anonymous, but we need to switch off to that. Reasonable complaints and feedback is fine, but this horrid stuff is too toxic to let in," says Kevin.

"I think we have the ability to commit to intelligent debate," says Pat Brady. "We need to constantly battle the thoughts that we're not as good in the north as those on George Street in Brisbane. Intelligent debate; whether it's on social media, in the newspaper or online it has to be there to actually show that we're capable of making good decisions here. That's what will drive investment."

One of the most well-worn negatives is the issue with youth crime and the unemployment that led to this. However, Pat Brady correctly touches on one big point: "Crime's not an issue that is exclusive to Townsville." It's an issue that every growing city is facing.

Yet whilst people are content to talk about our unbecoming youth, we are also seeing a huge insurgence of bright, innovative millennials who are ready to take the city by storm. "That's the nucleus of our future," says Kevin Gill.

THE CHALLENGE WE FACE WITH MILLENNIALS

Aside from Darwin, Townsville boasts the highest density of young individuals, with 20 to 30 year olds making up the vast majority of our population. However, Craig Stack points out that this harbours its own challenges.

"The biggest challenge is maintaining a young employment base and making an economy that's attractive to that group. Focus on what gives them a positive working and professional development environment. Then, let the lifestyle advantages of this region start to permeate. That's when we start to lock people down," Craig says.

Pat Brady agrees. "We need to package it up in order to sell it. If we do it right we'll get the skills back."

It's also these young, vibrant millennials who will help boost our tourism sector and bring with it another positive cycle. How? A young demographic attracts much needed digital and professional skills, **which has been proven to be missing from our city**. This in turn allows employers to expand their businesses; potentially leading to the prosperity that everyone is so desperate to have back.

"The best asset we have to promote tourism is the people here. We need to give the local residents activities to do. The moment Townsville brings in something new, people always get behind it," says Carolyn McManus, **Ribs and Rumps** and **The Coffee Club** Franchisee. "Let's focus on the young ones. We want the students that finish university to stay here but we have to give them something to do."

"I agree, it's all about enviable lifestyle and opportunities at our doorstep," Stephen Motti adds. "We've got world class health, world class education, world class sporting people and a world class environment. We need to take advantage of that."

"Townsville needs to take a lead with innovation," Craig Stack says. "We need a strong platform to attract that innovation. It comes down to North Queensland to agitate investment for the good ideas that exist here. Let's create an economy that's attractive to that age group. If we have 200,000 people promoting our city, that's 200,000 marketing agents."

TOWNSVILLE'S FUTURE IN TOURISM

Bringing in a new level of thought is Kevin Gill, who discusses how New Zealand successfully reinvented their tourism culture. "Tourism here has stagnated to a degree, but there's so much we can agitate to change the game like New Zealand did. They have natural assets, as does this region, but they changed their culture and improved their infrastructure and access to natural parks. It won't take much but we need a holistic change."

Pat Brady agrees, saying it's all about rebranding. "We have to do it ourselves. We can't keep expecting it to be solved for us. The North Queensland region has so much to offer and as locals, we possess unique insights to communicate this to a wider tourism market."

One project that Townsville City Council took hold of with both hands was the [Pure Projects](#) initiative, which Pat Brady applauds. "What I like about Pure Projects is it looked at the world stage and said, 'we can do it and we can do it locally. It's world ideas on a local level.'"

This type of investment in the city will undoubtedly lead to further investment region-wide as those from outside realise the potential our corner of paradise holds.

A great example of this is the \$1 million Townsville Airport led Tiger Air campaign which encouraged travellers to fly Tiger from Melbourne to Townsville. "There will be people on those flights coming from a cold winter's day and an hour's commute everyday that will say 'this is the place to be,'" says Stephen Motti. "We need investors to see that they can jump on a plane in Melbourne and 4.5 hours later be sitting on Magnetic Island. They'll see the opportunity here and invest, but they have to get here first," Kevin Gill says.

Craig Stack, whose business Knight Frank specialises in commercial real-estate, says the interest coming from people wanting to invest here is strong. However, the negative talk from locals is severely affecting those opportunities.

"Everybody comes to us from outside of town with dollars in their pocket, capable of big investment. Yet they say that they hear so much negative talk about Townsville," says Craig. "Yet you only have to have people in the car for one hour and talk to them about what's going on with LendLease and drive back past the stadium for them to see potential."

HAVE POLITICIANS FORGOTTEN ABOUT US?

One of the biggest arguments on the 'negative' side is that Townsville is often forgotten when it comes to politics. This was something every panelist agreed with. However, it's also something we can change.

"There's no doubt that our city should be playing a role on a state, national and international level. However, it's up to us to be able to communicate that," says Stephen Motti.

Pat Brady agrees, adding, "It's a hard game, politically, because there aren't many seats north of the tropic of Capricorn. However, we have to come back to the fact that it's up to us locals to make good arguments. Not only that, we need to stop expecting handouts – we have to go beyond that. We need to continue to push to make the best use of whatever funding comes our way, regardless of when it comes, so we can maximise the economic benefit. We also need to say that we're capable of building, planning and all that with the money you give us. That's where we have a chance of convincing government that we're worth investment."

"What we don't like is being viewed as though we are not capable of delivering and having people from down south sent here to build for us. That doesn't give us any benefit. We also need to develop at least preliminary business cases so that when we go to government we don't just go with an empty bucket and ask them to fill it up. If we can go with better arguments and say, 'we've got this idea and we think it can generate this much revenue in this much time', we would have a much better chance of convincing people that we're worth investing in, whether that's government or private. We are short of that."

We don't have to go all the way to Canberra to do this now, either, as Craig correctly points out.

"What we need to have is a sufficiently smart attitude about relationships here, in Brisbane, and in Canberra. From there, ensure the person who creates those relationships is consistently articulating our case and understanding what we need. Corporate memory and the self-interest in the business community need to be consistent. That's why we need to look at how we transact that. It would be beneficial if Townsville Enterprise and Chamber of Commerce had their own separate workshop to make sure what we're wanting to say is being articulated, often without the influence of the Mayor, local members and so on," Craig says.

In order to get ourselves into a more stable position for Government, Craig also notes that businesses could band together in order to move the city forward. "Sometimes it's not necessarily funds that we need. Sometimes it's people who have experience and expertise who are willing to give time. If we had 200 businesses commit 40 hours a year, that's a lot of time committed to getting actual outcomes."

However, moving the city forward is also a burden that rests on the shoulders of our locals.

"In the coming years, the biggest disrupter isn't technology – it's people. People putting their hand up and saying 'we should be prioritising this', demanding better. Our best sales people are our residents, they know the opportunities available. So collectively, let's listen, go out there and convert those opportunities and sell ourselves," Stephen Motti says.

Carolyn McManus agrees, saying you need to “take it down to a micro level with the residents” and stop waiting for a catalytic event.

“Waiting for the government or state government to do it isn't going to get us anywhere. There are small things every person can do, right down to the beautification of the city,” Carolyn says. “You don't have to do tremendous things. If you can be part of the community, help sporting committees, paint your fence, tidy your yard, then do that. Don't necessarily think, ‘council should be doing this’, instead, take responsibility. It's about getting away from that hand out mentality and becoming active and participating.”

WHY STAY IN TOWNSVILLE?

What we noticed was that each panelist could have taken their businesses to larger cities and made a base there. Yet they actively chose Townsville as both their business and home base, with varying reasons why.

“Regardless of where I go, I just can't find the commitment to community that you find here,” says Craig Stack. “A lot of the investment that was put through in what we would consider tougher times was by local people who were committed to reinvesting in our local region. I don't see that type of dominant commitment or energy if I go down the coast.”

Carolyn McManus can't help but agree. Aside from the positive schooling and family experiences, she also notes that “great access to people” and the “rawness and energy” she sees in the business community are second to none, along with the enormous potential our city has.

“I have business people here that I can talk to and it's honest. It's real. You get the good, the bad and the ugly, but with it an intention to help,” Carolyn says.

“Townsville is on the cusp. This year is going to be a good year for Townsville, but the next three? You just want to be a part of it.”

Stephen Motti puts it down to our part of the world . “World-class access to health, sport, education, research – you name it. We've got the skillsets, capacity and know-how to deliver. If we want to pull a few levers, we've got 17,000 businesses that can do a lot of heavy lifting. This place is set to play a bigger role beyond traditional markets and into next generation industries and jobs”

“Here, we're big enough that things happen but small enough that you can be successful, probably with less effort. You don't have to commit to 80 hours a week in the office. There's a balance in Townsville, even when you're successful,” Pat Brady says.

Kevin Gill fondly remembers the impact of the people. “For me, it's community, the people. Eighteen years ago I turned up with two boxes and a family from a picture perfect city in New Zealand. After we'd been away from Townsville for two years, we came back, called in to the dairy in Kirwan and the shop owner asked my children, ‘where have you two been? We missed you,’ and gave our kids their favourite snacks. I thought, ‘that's Townsville’. It's authentic, down to earth. We sweat together, we go through droughts together, we help our neighbour put their fence up when it blows. This is the DNA that's in everybody. It's cultural, it's Townsville Inc.”

Stephen Motti sums it up perfectly.

“We have a proud history, but how exciting is tomorrow?”