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Developing a Master Plan

Just as other scarce resource requires careful management, land also needs to be carefully managed. I am, however, regularly surprised at the general lack of planning about the way land is developed and used. In my experience, a master plan is a worthwhile investment.

So what is a master plan, what are the key benefits of a master plan, how should a master plan be developed, and what are the pitfalls to be avoided?

A master plan is a strategy for the development of land. It demonstrates how the built and natural environment are to be synthesised. It responds positively to constraints of all kinds, maximises opportunities and is flexible. A master plan is not a detailed design - this follows later. Importantly, a master plan should underpin an organisation's strategic plan.

There are several key benefits of a master plan. It;

- Identifies the capacity of land;
- Informs the timing and priority of future property acquisitions;
- Enables capital works budgets to reflect proposed development;
- Assists to leverage opportunities for project funding;

- Assists to manage expectations about the timing of new facilities; and
- Enables a statutory planning approvals strategy.

A master plan can also be an agent for engaging an organisation in its vision.

So how should a master plan be developed? I recommend that the process start by preparing a brief that clearly sets out the needs and expectations of the organisation. This will be important in commissioning the consultants that are required to enable the preparation of the master plan. The master plan brief may well involve consultation with key stakeholders.

Then, investigate and map the constraints and opportunities for development. These may be physical - for example ecological features; legislative including planning controls and building codes; encumbrances such as easements and covenants.

A master plan should also be informed by a strategy for obtaining the necessary planning approvals.

All this information will allow the preparation of a reliable master plan.

The order of cost to implement the master plan over time can then be

ascertained to inform a feasibility assessment, following which the master plan can be finalised.

I generally recommend to clients that in order to maintain the flexibility of a master plan, avoid submitting the master plan as part of an application for planning approval.

Developing a master plan is inherently complex. However, when approached in the right way, a master plan is an invaluable tool that will enable the economic and orderly development of land to support an organisational vision.

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