

Northern capital on the move

MOVERS AND SHAKERS ARE DIVIDED ON WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS, WRITES NORTH QUEENSLAND CORRESPONDENT **PETER MICHAEL**

TOWNSVILLE really does have it all. To see the north Queensland capital now, compared with 20 years ago, it is a sprawling metropolis.

From the air, on the popular lookout of Castle Hill still marked with the stick-figure Saint in a throwback to a university prank, the full scale of the state's second capital city comes clear.

To the north, Clive Palmer's Yabulu nickel refinery bookends the outskirts of the city.

Next, in what used to be swamp and salt pans, is a giant meccano set of vast engineering workshops in a new industrial estate that abuts the airport and RAAF base.

Sleek F-18 Hornet fighter jets peek out from underneath concrete bunkers, Chinook and Black Hawk helicopters buzz in and out like insects, and RAAF troop carriers mark the military end of the strip.

Down at the main airport terminal,



returned Diggers from Afghanistan, high-vis FIFO mine workers and North Queensland Cowboys supporters make up some of the 1.6 million passengers a year.

Shiny new suburbs snake west along Ross River in an urban sprawl of new estates and defence housing where, on average, 5000 people – or 13 people a day – move to Townsville every year to live (population 189,000).

James Cook University, the Townsville Base Hospital and the Defence Force's Lavarack Barracks form their own brains-and-brawn precinct and are key in this city's economic success story.

At the foot of Castle Hill, on the coast, is the historic CBD, genteel old suburbs full of quaint Queenslander houses, the popular beachfront Strand, Flinders St party strip, marina, hotels, casino and industrial port.

"It is a vibrant, go-get-them city," JCU vice-chancellor Sandra Harding said.

She is the personification of modern-day north Queensland. Elegant, eloquent and

super-smart, the economic sociologist is the new face of the North, a compelling advocate and voice of vision.

"We refer to it as a 'Super Zone' story," Prof Harding said.

"It is a university town, garrison city, administrative centre, and a services sector with agricultural wealth and the resources boom on our edges."

She sees Asia and the Pacific as the future, with a focus on tropical expertise.

"It depends on where you think the centre of gravity is, in reality we are exactly where we need to be."

It was Aristotle who wrote of the frigid zone, temperature zone and torrid zone, she said.

"But here we are 40 per cent of world's population and 80 per cent of global biodiversity in the tropics."

Higher education, alone, is an export estimated to be worth more than \$1 billion a year to the local economy.

"What we do is becoming more important, not less, I'm on the north Queensland bus, and it is an exciting place to be."

Brad Webb, 51, worth about \$114 million, is the classic local lad made good. Townsville born and bred, he grew up in a Housing Commission home in the blue-collar suburb of Stuart and tried his hand as an apprentice diesel-fitter before finding his niche in construction. BM Webb Group is a powerhouse of industrial property development in the North – with everything from rock quarrying to concrete to industrial land development, hotels and commercial buildings.

SUCCESS STORIES: Local boy made good Brad Webb (above left) and troops that boost the economy.



SHIP SHAPE: The
Townsville Port
opens up options.
Picture: Rob Maccoll



BY THE NUMBERS

189,000
POPULATION

241,000
POPULATION BY 2021

6.7%
UNEMPLOYMENT RATE

\$13.37b
GROSS REGIONAL PRODUCT

\$352,000
MEDIAN HOUSE PRICE

108,000
INTERNATIONAL VISITORS

845,000
DOMESTIC VISITORS

But, in the immediate economic downturn, he paints a less rosy picture. "Bottom line: Is Townsville going well? No. We are in for a rough ride. It is going to get tougher," Mr Webb said.

"Do I want it to go bad? No. But that is the reality.

"It is time for us to take the medicine of the recession we had to have."

He thinks Australians have generally become lazy and wants north Queensland to reverse the trend.

"The Defence Force is a godsend; I can't speak highly enough of the university; we've got good climate, water, soil, resources.

"Someone has got to lift it, shift it, make it, dig it, grow it, mow it, build it and sell it. Why not us?"

Many observers believe Townsville, because of its highly diversified economy with a gross regional product of about \$14 billion where public administration, including defence makes up 15 per cent of the pie, is largely immunised against the virus that is the post-GFC crisis.

"It might be buffered, but in no way is it inoculated," Townsville Chamber of Commerce chief executive Marie-Claude Brown said.

"We are not a separate country, and nor are we exempt of the economic pressures.

"There are shades of grey, we need to spruik up confidence, around town they say there is only one bubble and that is the bubble of confidence."

She said that while construction and retail was soft, Myer was about to open in a rebuilt Stockland Shopping Centre in October.

"It is a sign of something. It is recognition of disposable income, population size and spending power.

"The fact they can make such a sizeable

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**JCU VICE-CHANCELLOR
SANDRA HARDING**



commercial decision is a good indicator for the future."

Townsville Port, because of its multiple commodities, strengthens the economy as a key driver, be it bitumen, live export, bulk sugar, coal or iron ore.

But Ms Brown dismissed the notion the city thrives on government handouts.

"In a way the city has become a victim of its own success. We understand the big bang infrastructure project is not going to happen, it is time for us to be masters of our own destiny."

On taking office, Townsville Mayor Jenny Hill launched a new initiative dubbed "Townsville Shines".

It was a bold move given the city is sometimes known as "Brownsville" because of the relentless tropical sun.

"Here it is about lifestyle," the Mayor said, speaking in her inner-city chambers.

"A working mum can be five minutes from day care and 10 minutes to work.

"We've got cranes on our skyline. Two new buildings are going up."

In a bid to resuscitate the City Heart, plans are afoot for 30,000 people to be living and working in the CBD by 2030.

Townsville CBD Taskforce chairman Craig Stack, of Knight Frank, said the ongoing construction of two new office towers was a start.

"Townsville had a dead heart, and after more than 20 years of decline it is a big ship to turn around," Mr Stack said.

They also hope to build a new sports stadium for the Cowboys and other major events, such as the V8 Supercars, as well as a new entertainment facility on the old rail yards to bring people back into the city.