

CUMMINGS ECONOMICS

38 Grafton St (PO Box 2148) CAIRNS Q 4870 ABN 99 734 489 175

Tel : 07 4031 2888

Email : cummings@cummings.net.au

Website : www.cummings.net.au



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CAIRNS AND AGEING ARTICLE FOR CAIRNS SUN

Cairns has one of the lowest proportions of population 65 plus of Australia's leading 15 cities at 10.0%, well below State average of 13.2% and Australia's average of 14.0%.

Only Darwin, with 7.2% is lower. Other northern cities of Townsville and Mackay are also relatively low at 10.7%.

By contrast, Sunshine Coast with 18.3% and Gold Coast at 15.9% have very high proportions.

Reasons for the low Cairns' percentage can be found first in the city's strong growth over a long period of time. Some 65 years ago, Cairns/Mulgrave population was only about 30,000 compared with almost 160,000 today. Population moving in has mainly been in the working age group rather than retirees. In fact, there has been an historic pattern of people retiring south, often to be closer to family roots and better medical services.

However population over 65 has been rising and can be expected to rise as life expectancies increase generally but also as better local medical facilities are developed and other facilities like retirement villages and aged care homes, reducing the incentive to retire 'down south'.

While some statistics purport to show that life expectancies in the north are lower, this is a fallacy. Early days when some tropical diseases like malaria took their toll are long past. As in the rest of Australia, life expectancies of the indigenous population are lower. Non-indigenous population life expectancies are similar to other areas in Australia. Differences are due to a higher proportion of indigenous population.

Technological advances relating to everyday living in the tropics like air-conditioning, superior insecticides and detergents, cyclone warning systems, etc. have made the area a much more comfortable place in which to live, not just for older people but for all.

Build-up of population has brought with it a range of facilities and services not available in the past in fields like higher education, social, sporting, cultural, shopping and entertainment facilities, many of which are used by older members of the community.

Long may the progress continue.