CUMMINGS ECONOMICS

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FAR NORTH QUEENSLAND DRAFT REGIONAL PLAN

The following raises six issues that require a different approach.

1) Avoidance of centralisation of decision making and duplication of effort;
2) Understanding regional boundaries and structures;
3) Understanding the region's historical economic development context;
4) Understanding of and respect for different wider national and international connectivity needs;
5) The need to not constantly put off some tough decisions;
6) Understanding the importance of and opportunities to achieve agricultural development.

1. AVOIDANCE OF DUPLICATION OF EFFORT

Preparation of these Regional Plans involves a great deal pf government employee time and it is of concern that these Plans obviously duplicate much of the work that regional local governments are responsible for and substitutes decision making out of Brisbane based on Brisbane views of the world and Brisbane values for views and values of regional local governments. There is a need to respect regional decisions that reflect a deeper knowledge and appreciation of local situations, threats and opportunities and are resolved through local democratic processes.

In more recent years, we have seen far too much decision-making shift from local government and local boards to remote Brisbane based bureaucracies and political appointees.

Queensland is a big decentralised State with very different circumstances and different policies are required, especially in the North, if progress is to be maximised.

We have seen the very strong growth of the region's economy achieved under more decentralised regimes in past decades slow down during the past decade as more and more centralisation of decision making takes place (see chart).

I urge your Government to change this attitude and have faith in the ability of regional people to make the best decisions for their area. The State Government complains about the Federal Government wasting money by duplicating State responsibilities.

Although it is necessary for the State to forward plan the delivery of services that it is responsible for, the degree to which it is involved in wasteful duplication of local government roles in the preparation of these Plans is of concern.

2. UNDERSTANDING REGIONAL BOUNDARIES AND STRUCTURES

In selecting an area to be called Far North Queensland, it would have been better to have selected the whole of the area for which Cairns acts as the major commercial service hub city/ capital, including the Peninsula/ Torres Strait area and the other Gulf Local Government areas out to the Queensland border along the Savannah Way road system. Although the Gulf area is also associated with North West Queensland, its main commercial and transport links are with Cairns rather than Townsville.

Although in the text of the Plan document, Gulf and Peninsula/ Torres areas are often referred to as being associated, it would have been better to have developed the Plan for this wider area in the first place. For tourism statistical purposes, this area is called Tropical North Queensland.

Containment of the study area to the smaller area results in a failure to adequately portray and take into account the sheer size of the area and extent of underdeveloped resources serviced by the regional capital of Cairns. The Cairns' commercial servicing region covers an area 1½ times the size of Victoria with about four times that State's water run-off and as deep from north to south as the rest of Queensland (see maps).

It also means that the poverty of internal ground transport links of vital importance to the region's continuing development does not come out clearly.

3. UNDERSTANDING HISTORICAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT

The description of the Cairns/ Far North Queensland region's economy as background to the Plan fails to put the region's economic development in an historical context.

This lack of historical context in turn leads to a shallow appreciation of:

- the policy directions needed to achieve strong development, and
- the place of the region in the development of the State and national economies.

Historically, Australia's tropical regions posed a much greater challenge for a society with most of its technology and people derived from cool temperate zone Northwestern Europe to develop and make productive. The further north, the greater the challenge but also the greater the potential in terms of rainfall and biological plant growth potential and marine resources.

Economic development was initially late commencing and received a number of early setbacks resulting in very low population levels by the 1950s, 'off centre' from major populated areas of the continent. However, the area was not poor in underlying resources and four global factors led to opportunities to develop those resources – growing global markets (especially nearby in Asia), transport developments breaking down old cost barriers of remoteness, development of technology suited to a tropical environment and success breeds success factors.

As a result, the region has been able to massively develop its resource-based earnings from outside the region from the rest of Australia and the world including from mining, primary industries and tourism. This has provided the basis for expansion of higher order manufacturing and service industries in the face of, and despite, centralising competition from metropolitan areas.

The region's 'far northern' location has helped in this and the early development of a hub city position in the wider northern Australia/ Southwest Pacific area. What is important to recognise is that much of the region's rich terrestrial and marine biological resource base remains underdeveloped and the major need for transport and other infrastructure developments to achieve progress in this field.

Also, what does not come out clearly is that, although the region has a slightly above average presence of government employment because of the presence of one of Australia's only four operational navy bases in Cairns, the region's growth has been private enterprise led and the region leads northern Australia in number of businesses and non-government employment by a large margin.

A major difference of the wider region to other Queensland regions is that all but three of the State's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander local government areas are in the wider Tropical/ Far North region.

The region's development policy needs are thus, very different to most regions around Australia, but so are its prospects for further development.

4. DIFFERENT NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL CONNECTIVITY NEEDS

The region's economic structure leads to it having connectivity needs different to the other major northern regions. Most northern regions export minerals and primary products overseas and then import major amounts of goods and services from southern Australia. They sell little to southern Australia.

The Far North with its large horticultural sector is different. It also sells and has a need to transport substantial amounts of produce to southern capitals other than Brisbane.

The need for efficient direct connectivity with these capitals is reinforced by the very large road-borne tourism traffic the region attracts. The Draft FNQ Regional Plan fails to clearly identify this.

In showing connectivity needs, the Plan restricts the description of the Lynd Hughenden link to connectivity to the North Queensland region. It does not identify the importance of this link to achieving direct sealed heavy transport links to Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, links with the central west tourism area and with the developing Outback Way direct link via Alice Springs to Laverton and Perth.

The Plan also seems to fail to identify the importance of sealing of the Savannah Way unsealed link between Normanton and Burketown in the development of a more direct sealed connection between Cairns and the Northern Territory's developing gas fields and Darwin with a 400km distance saving.

The special relationship of Cairns with Papua New Guinea and the Pacific as distinct from relations with South East and East Asia could be emphasised more in the Plan. A substantial segment of the region's population are Nationals and Expats from that area with recent development of additional air services to Fiji and a new barge route to service the Bougainville copper mine being reopened.

5. THE NEED TO MAKE SOME TOUGH DECISIONS

There are three major infrastructure constraints that require tough political decisions to be made that previous governments have failed to face up to:

- Cairns' seaport;
- An efficient road freight route through Cairns;
- The range crossing between Cairns and Mareeba.

The Plan fails to recognise that the past expansion and future expansion needs in Cairns' seaport results in it being short of developed deep-water foreshore land. The obvious and long identified solution is to extend the port onto the northern end of Admiralty Island involving the conversion of an area of shallow mangrove swamp and a scrubby vegetation on a long sand ridge to port/ industrial uses, and a need to build a short bridge to the area over Smiths Creek.

Such a move would have substantial positive implications for the port's role in defence and shipyard expansion and removal of hazards of fuel storage from close to the main city area.

Compensating restoration of mangrove swamps fish habitat could be achieved through removal or relocation of a bond wall in the East Trinity area.

A large State Development Area (SDA) that threatens to take out a large area of land from cane production in the Gordonvale area threatens the willingness of Mulgrave Sugar Mill to invest in diversified production in the short run and mill viability in the long run – an industry that underpins employment and earns outside income for the regional economy.

It is suggested that the need for this SDA be reviewed and the northern end of Admiralty Island become a State Development Area. A transport internodal facility proposed for the Gordonvale SDA would be better located close to the seaport.

The second infrastructure constraint that needs to be dealt with comes out of past failures by the State Government to recognize the extent the region would grow.

In the 1970s, there was a failure to reserve land for a western heavy transport route from the Mulgrave Road through to the Kamerunga route. Housing was allowed to fill in the area.

While there is a plan to upgrade the Western Arterial route from the north into the Reservoir Hill area, the existing route from there through to Mulgrave Road and the port is not suitable for heavy vehicles and high traffic volumes. It is important that the issue is addressed including the need for land resumptions likely to be necessary.

The third major hard decision is the need to upgrade the range road crossing between Cairns and Mareeba for safe heavy transport use, either by way of a new route or upgrading the existing Kuranda Range Road. It is ridiculous that the link between the main port, airport, rail and road head at Cairns and the 70,000 population and industries to the west out to the Gulf and up the Peninsula cannot currently handle the standard B-double freight trucks in use all over Australia.

The $200m budgeted in the Draft Regional Plan to improve safety is a 'band aid' that does not solve the problem. A decision taken in 2008 not to upgrade the road has led to traffic over this vital route 'flat lining'.

Diagrams in the Draft Regional Plan tend to hide the fact that this route is the main route in the region taking traffic between Cairns and the Tablelands, the Gulf, the Burke Development Road and the Peninsula route and carries the largest traffic volume in the State from the coast to western centres, north of the south-east corner. The need to replace the Barron River bridge and the land slip problems on the existing road heightens the need for tough decisions to be made that will involve large expenditure.

6. UNDERSTANDING OPPORTUNITIES FOR AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

While the region's rich biological resource base's value from the development of tourism is now widely recognised in policy circles, the attitudes to the potential for large increases in agricultural production are heavily affected by negative attitudes to land clearing and water resource development in southern Australia where large-scale land clearing and water resource development occurred many years ago.

Over the last 30 years, the region has shown a capacity to achieve strong agricultural development, especially the expansion of horticultural production on the Tablelands in the Mareeba Dimbulah Irrigation Area and the establishment of a new cropping area at the base of Cape York Peninsula area at Lakeland.

The development occurred almost entirely on previously cleared land and as a result of decisions made in the 1950s to build the Tinaroo Falls Dam and in the case of Lakeland, through farmer investment in water storage. The potential is there to continue this expansion. But it will require a different approach to land clearing and water resource development.

It is important to understand that historically, there was a lag in the tropical zone in the development of agricultural technology including plant and animal breeding and mechanisation compared to Europe's temperate zone. However, as technology suited to tropical areas improves, agricultural production can be expected to expand.

Since the post-war period, three great advances have underpinned the expansion of agriculture in the region – mechanisation of cane harvesting, introduction of superior Brahman cattle breeds and the sealing of roads to southern markets and improved road freight vehicles underpinning the rise of the horticultural sector.

The Far North Queensland region has led in this development and it can be expected that this will continue. However, there are three major areas related to land tenure and land use planning that need to be addressed and this is not clear in the Draft Regional Plan.

The first is transport of inputs in, and outputs out. Some of the issues in this field are raised in the Plan but not clearly linked to agricultural expansion.

The second is water. In tropical areas, there are large water runoffs but they tend to be seasonal. Major productivity increases can be achieved by evening out water availability during the year. The Plan discusses some of these but because of the restricted boundaries used, some of the most important are not.

The third however, is that agricultural development requires land clearing. This does not seem to be addressed and it is urgent that it is addressed. Tree clearing constraints are currently holding up agricultural expansion. There are such large areas of uncleared land in the region that even say 10% allowed to be cleared would have minimum environmental impact but represent a major new area for expansion.

We are looking to this Government to come to grips with this issue along with sensible water catchment use policies.

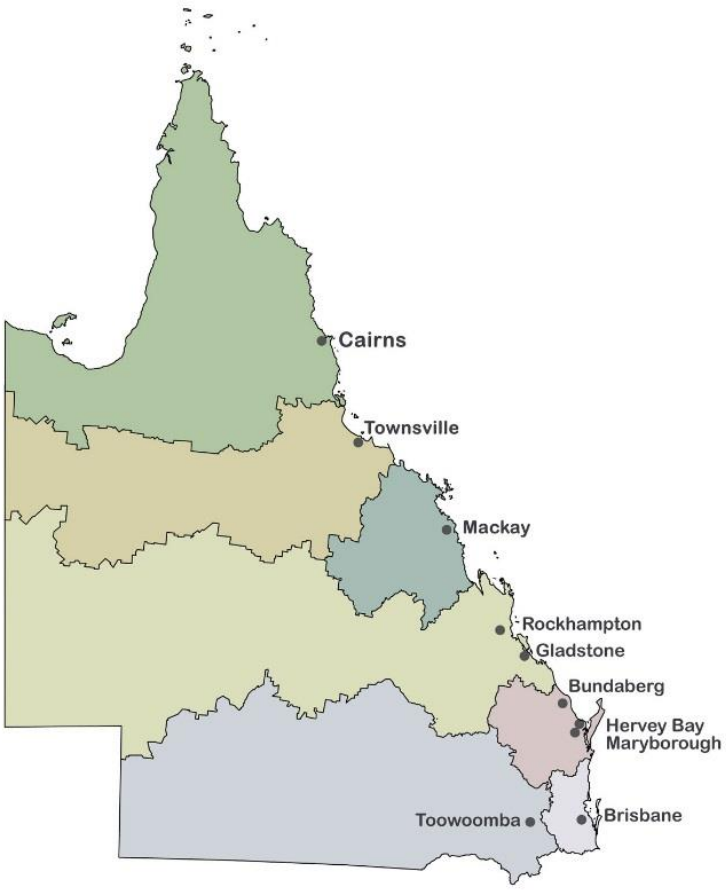
Yours faithfully



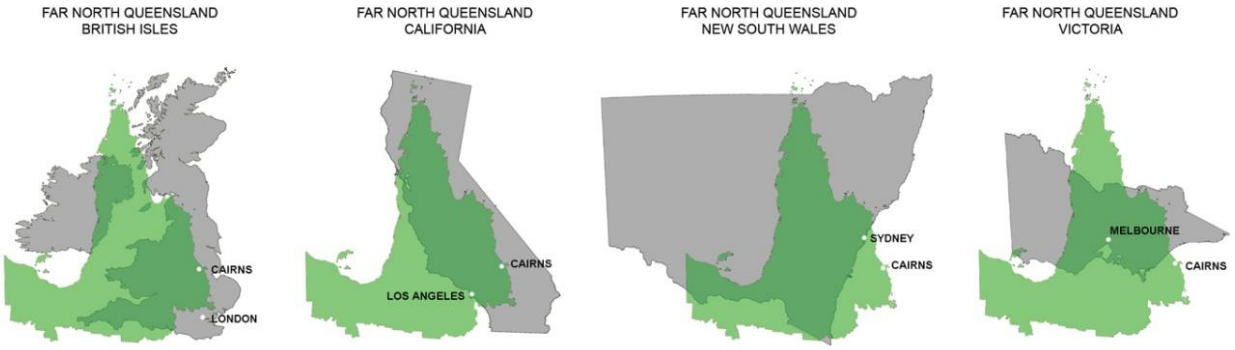
W S (Bill) Cummings *BEcon (UQ), HonDEcon (CQU)*
Principal

ATTACHMENT – Maps and Charts

Map #1: Queensland Major Regional Cities and Commercial Servicing Regions

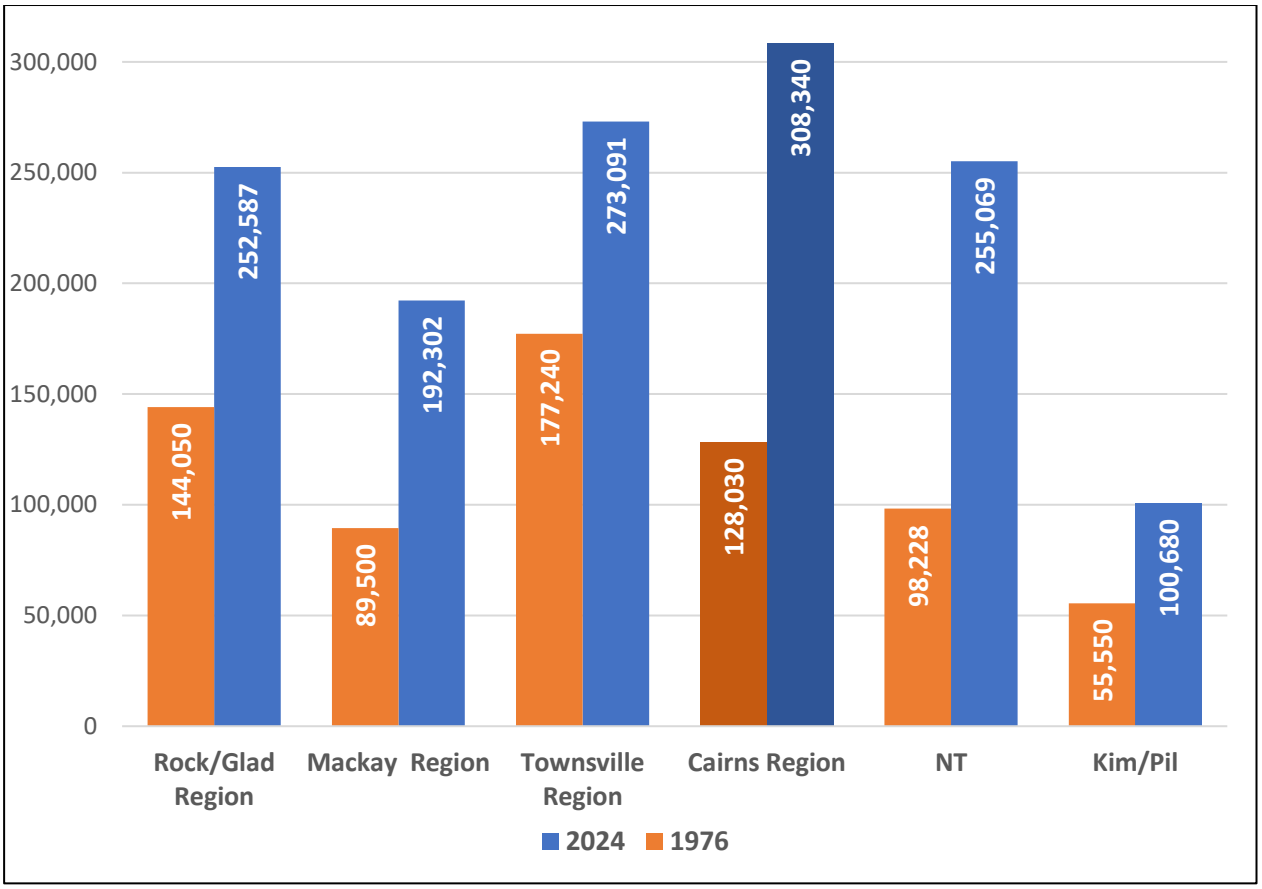


Map #2: Comparative Size of Regions



Source: Cummings Economics.

Chart #1: Residential Population, Northern Australia Regions, 1976 and 2024

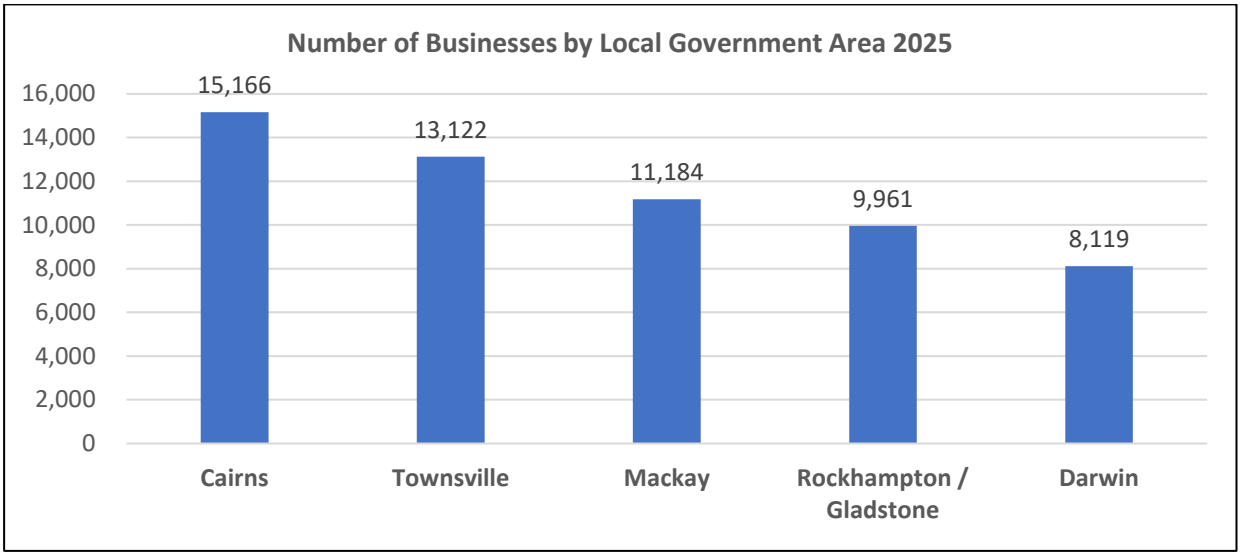


Source: Cummings Economics from ABS Cat No. 3218.0 et al.

Note Boundaries:

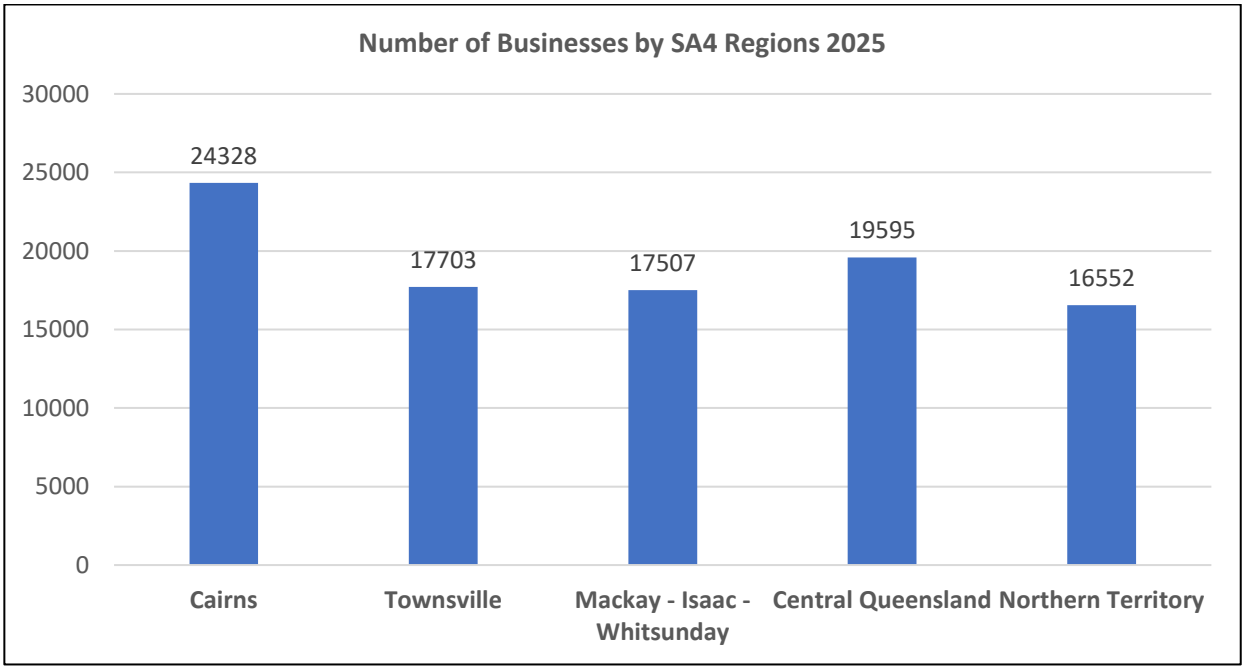
- *Rockhampton/Gladstone Region – Fitzroy plus Central West.*
- *Townville Region – Townsville SA4 plus Queensland Outback North less Carpentaria SA2.*
- *Cairns Region – Cairns SA4 plus Queensland Outback Far North plus Carpentaria SA2.*

Chart #2: Number of Businesses by Local Government Area 2025



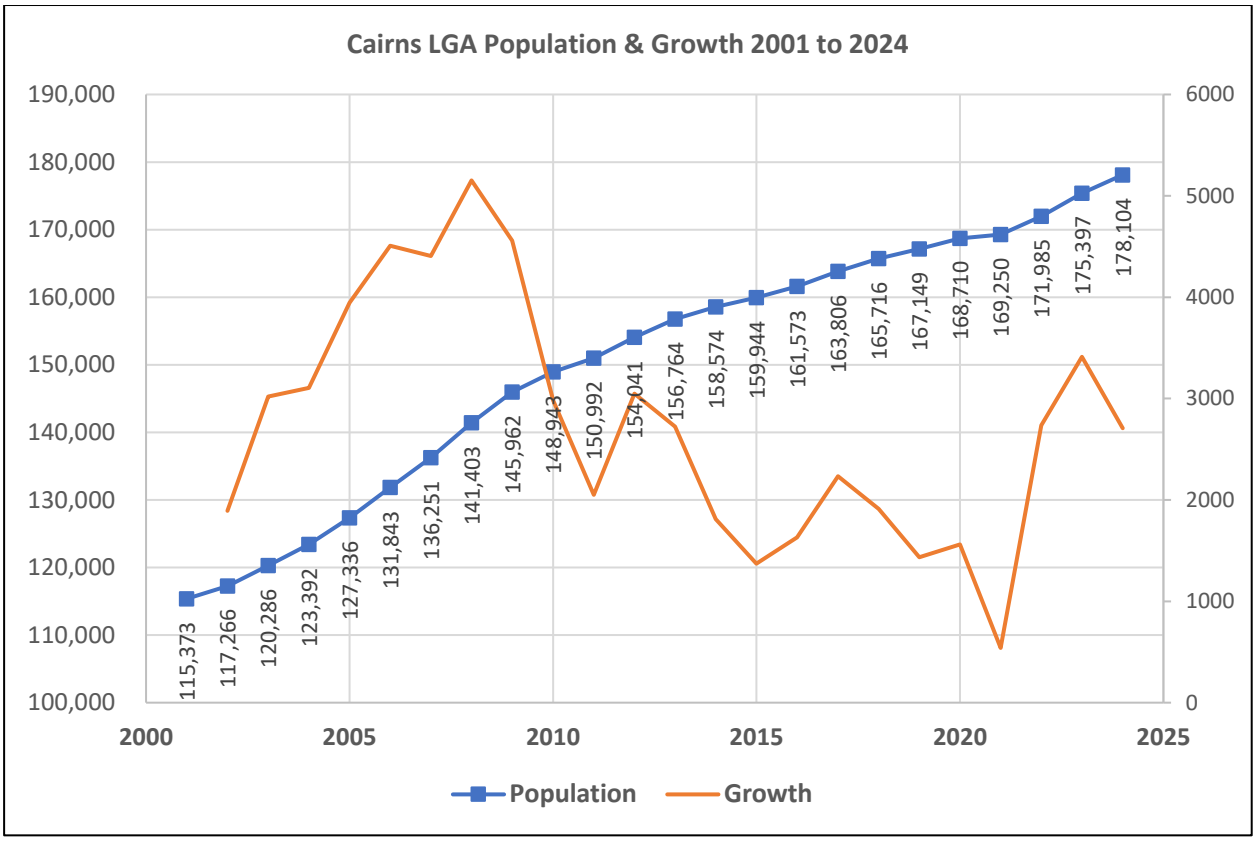
Source: Cummings Economics from ABS data.

Chart #3: Number of Businesses by SA4 Regions 2025



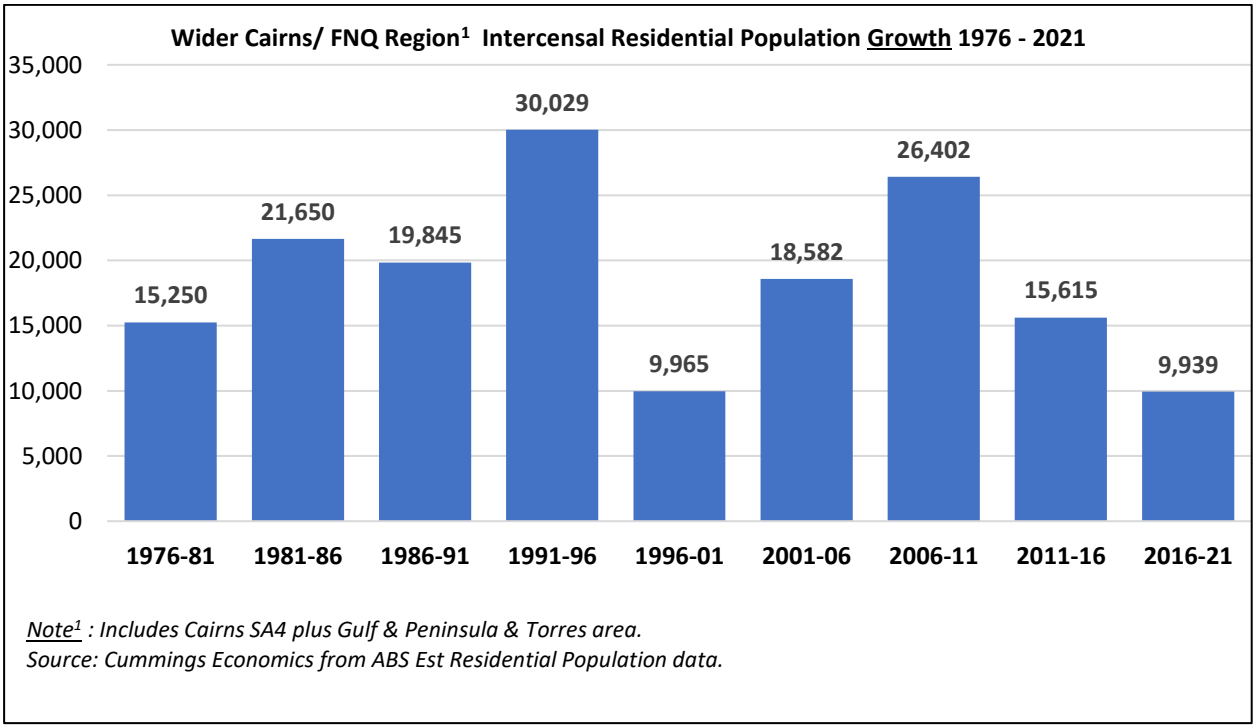
Source: Cummings Economics from ABS data.

Chart #4: Cairns LGA Population & Growth 2001 to 2024



Source: Cummings Economics from ABS; Regional Population data.

Chart #5: Wider Cairns/ FNQ Intercensal Residential Population Growth 1976 to 2021



Note[1] : Includes Cairns SA4 plus Gulf & Peninsula & Torres area.
Source: Cummings Economics from ABS Est Residential Population data.