Attraction of Professional Workers to Tablelands - a "Region of Choice"

Background

The Tablelands Region, west of Cairns, has a notable 'leakage' of resident workers - who travel to their places of employment outside the Tablelands. As the region's population continues to grow, an increasingly critical issue facing the Tablelands will be its capacity to provide sufficient jobs across industry sectors to support a sustainable economic future. There is also an issue of some Industry sectors and community having difficulty in attracting Professional, white collar workers i.e. Solicitors, Medical and health practitioners, Engineers, Agronomists/Horticulturalists, accountants and other professional services.

Within the Tablelands Community Plan, under 4.2.1 (a) (IV) "*Continue to develop a trained workforce to support new and expanding industries including the agricultural industries*", the Tablelands Industry Workforce group has a lead agency role together with RTO's. TIWG was also identified in the action 4.2.2 (a) "*More skilled workers and professionals are attracted to and retained on the Tablelands*". It has also been identified that the Tablelands need to attract "Knowledge workers". The Skill level of the Tablelands population is behind the Queensland average. Only 38.6% of Tablelands adults have completed Yr. 11 or 12 schooling compared with 49.5% of Queensland adults 15yrs+ (ABS, 2006 Census). Only 10.8% of Tablelands people aged 15 yrs. + possess an advanced diploma or diploma and 17.7% a bachelor degree or higher compared with 13.1% and 26.0% of Queenslanders (ABS, 2006 Census). The "Brain Drain" (Exodus of young people from Region who leave the area in search of educational and employment opportunities in larger regional centres, capital cities or industries offering better wages and conditions) has been cited as a key constraint to the development of the Region's economy.

There is a real need to Retain and attract people of working age including young people and families to the region and encourage young people leaving the region to remain connected to family and community to increase likelihood of them returning and/or encouraging other young people to settle here (Tablelands Community Plan, 2012).

The Tablelands needs to become a lifestyle destination of choice to attract knowledge workers, global economy workers, Fly In-Fly out (FIFO) workers and home-based businesses in the professional services industries.

From a recent draft paper *Image and Perception of the Tablelands – Positive steps to move forward to become a "Region of Choice" – a Background Paper* TIWG has identified the following "Image and Perception" issues which present hurdles to the Tablelands becoming "a region of choice" for a skilled and sustainable workforce:-
- Lack of information for the area
- More promotion and education of the Tablelands
- People are not attracted to the Tablelands because of a lack of restaurants, coffee shops, night life, Lack of cultural facilities
- Some "Quality of life" issues around medical services, too little for young people to do at night outside of sport
- Little information available on education and schooling outside of region
- People leave the Tableland to further their career (an 'economic bottleneck' particularly in Public service with little opportunity for advancement beyond PO3/AO5)
- Coordination of publicity and services

- Access to information about community/facilities etc.
- Lack of self-promotion - Tourism marketing is critical, Marketing the region, Lack of branding
- Need to pitch marketing at younger and middle aged families… adventure, lifestyle. "An Adventure-seekers paradise" – rather than region being seen as 'retirement village'. As a Region we should look at places down south that have done this like larger Regional centres in NSW i.e. Tamworth, Armidale, Orange.

Possible Solutions

We need to promote and actively sell our:
- Ready access to international airport
- Rural lifestyle with good educational, sporting, recreational services and other community services and facilities
- Bountiful natural assets, great climate and clean green environment
- Telecommunications infrastructure in place to support knowledge workers and global economy workers and community leaders taking action to upgrade infrastructure such as the early roll out of the NBN to the region; and
- Affordable cost of living.
- Promote and create more awareness of the opportunities available in existing industries and professional services on the Tablelands.
- Business migration/Business attraction/incubation – campaign into larger centres – suburban Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne etc. - that can do business here. Cheaper land, housing, water, good services, better environment, safe etc.

"Region of Choice" Forum

Tablelands Industry Workforce Group (TIWG) hosted a "Region of Choice" Forum at the Barron Valley Hotel, Atherton, on 24 August 2012. 26 Participants, from Industry, Community and Government attended. This forum was aimed at discussing and identifying solutions to the attraction and retention of professional and 'knowledge workers' on Tableland. Three high-calibre speakers spoke on this issue: Ian Church, CEO, Tablelands Regional Council; Peter Apel, Apels Solicitors and Sandy Whyte, Community Engagement & Development Manager – QITE and formerly Executive Officer of Cairns Chamber of Commerce. Facilitated discussion then occurred around identifying proactive actions that we could undertake as a Community. The participants confirmed the issues previously identified and through Nominal Group Technique following opportunities were identified:

1. **Businesses Collaborating to offer employment / professional career opportunities (23 – includes dots put against individual ideas below)**
   - Targeted immigration from SE Asia, NE Europe to Tablelands / FNQ (National Australia Bank assisting business to sponsor) (2)
   - Develop links with Universities (i.e. JCU) to develop graduate programs (2)
   - Lack of Industry professional networks to support Job sharing
   - Businesses collaborate to offer work that will be enough for one professional position (i.e. two businesses share one person if not enough work within one business) (1)
   - Promote innovative business models within business (different ways of doing things to provide employment opportunities)
   - Identify businesses that want to grow and network their needs (3).

2. **Getting Good Information about Jobs and the region out there (23)**
   o Lack of / or consistent information provided to potential employees or candidates (2)
   o Explore existing electronic portals (e.g. Tablelands online, new Malanda website) (1)
   o Explore new electronic news/portals e.g. Newsport coming to ATCC Sep 20 meeting to speak
   o Innovative Job advertisements and job descriptions
   o Consistent information spread out so all websites have it (1)
   o Get lots of "testimonials" of recent migrants talking about why they moved and what they like about it (1)
   o Develop a welcome pack (online) like the Australian Defence Force (ADF) guide (1)
   o People need information on lifestyle & liveability for each town (people move to towns not shires)

3. **What are the professional & skilled jobs available – identify and promote and target market (16)**
   o Identify employment opportunities; Identify shared employment opportunities between employers and sub-regions
   o Promote the jobs, promote the lifestyle & investment opportunities; promote the lifestyle, environment and investment opportunities, promote the jobs
   o Promotion of migration has to be linked to promotion of jobs and investment opportunities (2)
   o Know your workforce first – what jobs are available – vacancies (LEC may be able to assist with employer survey) (1)
   o Portal for all (Tableland) jobs
   o Interview recent migrants to determine what are the issues retention of migrants (2)
   o Marketing
     ▪ Target market
     ▪ Channels i.e. online, social media
   o Who is our market?

4. **Developing Infrastructure & Transport (16)**
   o Promote infrastructure projects that attract and retain qualified, younger workers (2)
   o Lobby to develop a public transport system
   o Transport Infrastructure – better commuter road between coast and Tablelands. Better Public, Rail, Air & Road (4)

5. **Developing the Social Life of the Region (12)**
   o Develop ability to support new families coming into the region that assists their transition to become a part of the community
   o Welcoming Committee (Rotary? Expand?) – (the Former Tablelands SFS – now TIWG initiated this idea in 2008 and was taken through TFC to Rotary/Lions in Atherton)
   o Need places for people to meet socially
   o Encourage community "branding" of friendliness, so people fit into community (i.e. for retention) (1)
   o Promote your town through local sports heroes (Advertising)
   o If people are going to Cairns to socialise, give them a place to socialise here (1)
   o Recruit young people
   o RE Attract / Retain workforce (additional ideas) –

- Build active sense of community on all levels e.g. neighbourhood/village/town area/TRC etc.
- Reality - not just perception
- Holistic/quadruple bottom line
- Public transport

6. **Promote the recreational opportunities of the Region (6)**
    o Community development projects – i.e. pathways and bikeways that are linked to town and community centres and are attractive to visitors
    o Develop / support mountain bike projects – attract lifestyle people in good economic bracket (People move to ride)
    o Promote adventure eco-tourism that appeals to a younger workforce – linking trails etc.

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