

# Full speed ahead

A skyline filled with masts and cranes reflects Townsville's new importance. **Brett Judge reports**

**I**F THE simple measure of a city's growth and prosperity is the number of cranes on its skyline, one city in the state's north has that — and more.

Just count the number of new boats in Townsville's ever-expanding coastal precinct.

The Breakwater Marina is undergoing a \$200 million redevelopment, the Blue on Blue marina resort on Magnetic Island cost about \$135 million, and the State Government remains committed to a \$1 billion ocean terminal and canal estate adjoining Jupiters Casino.

Shaun Watson, from charter yacht company Tropic Sail, said while the Whitsundays would continue to be one of the yachting hotspots of the north, Townsville was growing at an extraordinary rate.

"You just have to look at how many new moorings there are in the breakwater," he said.

"They've added a couple of hundred new berths and the new plan is to extend each of the existing mooring fingers.

"It's a sign that there's more money coming to Townsville because people are paying \$1 million-plus for a block of land across from the marina with a private berth, and they've still got money left over to buy a boat."

Mr Watson's explanation of boats as a measure of wealth was simple — BOAT stands for "bring on another thousand", and he has met enough boat owners to know the day they buy the boat won't be the last time they reach for their wallet.

"Were not talking about little runabouts — these are luxury sailing yachts and motorboats," he said.

"It's the fly-in, fly-out business-people who come to Townsville, like what they see and buy a unit here and a boat as well. But the Townsville population is becoming more and more affluent and can afford to put big flash boats in the water."

Long regarded as the state's poorer northern country cousin, Townsville is at the centre of an economic and population boom.

The city derided as the place people went for a holiday in winter but steered clear of at any other time has emerged in the past decade as a thriving centre in which people want to live and work — and prosper.

Mining and construction have created jobs, in turn attracting support services and the people to go with them.

Now, the smart money is on Townsville claiming the parochial title of "capital of north Queensland" over Cairns.

AEC Group research estimates Townsville's gross regional product at \$11.84 billion last financial year. The region's economy grew five times faster than the rest of the nation between 2004 and 2006 — and the trend looks likely to continue.

Whereas Qantas reduced the number of flights out of Cairns this year, it added flights to its Townsville schedule, aiming to attract businesspeople travelling to and from Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.

Townsville's success as a sporting city is also obvious with three national sporting teams — the Cowboys (NRL), the Crocodiles (NBL) and the Fire (WNBL) — a V8 Supercar race on the event calendar next year and a



**WEALTH OF OPPORTUNITY:** Charter operator Shaun Watson is catching the breeze  
Pictures: **Cameron Laird**

bid in with the A-League to host a soccer team.

There's a reliable water supply, making the region attractive to foot-loose industries with a thirst for expansion.

The Australian Defence Force will station another 1500 soldiers in Townsville by 2010, boosting the demand for support infrastructure.

Mayor Les Tyrell says the economic and social mix had enabled the city to grow: "We have a whole range of industries and job opportunities here — there are three base metal refineries, a major port, James Cook University and the Defence Force."

Cr Tyrell said Townsville had reached the stage where more than 2000 new dwellings were needed to be built each year to keep up with demand.

He did not think it was merely a case of developers speculating on possible markets.

"It's real money, because all of those units and all of those commercial and industrial developments we see being built are selling," he said.

"We still have a housing shortage because of our high growth rate and our inability — because of a lack of tradespeople — to build enough homes each year."

The council has anticipated the growth with several new residential developments either under construction or being planned.

Some are redevelopments of older suburbs such as Garbutt, near Townsville Airport; others are expansions of recently developed estates.

About 3000 new housing lots are expected to go on sale at Bohle, north of the city, at the end of this year.

Another satellite city is being planned at Rocky Springs to Townsville's west, which will be developed in the next 35 years to

provide residential, retail, business, education and conservation areas. And acreage to the north, south and west of the city continues to attract interest.

Meanwhile, James Cook University has released plans for a \$1.2 billion precinct incorporating academic, residential and commercial development.

And News Limited, publisher of *The Sunday Mail*, announced this month that it will spend \$52 million to build a state-of-the-art printing plant in Townsville.

There have been as many as 12 cranes in the CBD for more than a year — most on construction sites for accommodation to keep up with the expected population growth of 5000-7000 new residents each year.

Townsville's population at the 2006 Census was 169,484 people, or 4 per cent of the state's population, while Cairns had 122,731 and a slightly higher level of growth.

Office space in the CBD is at a premium and there has been a burst

of activity to supply up to 42,500sq m of new offices within five years.

Colliers International's Townsville director of research and consulting, Colin Dwyer, said Townsville's industrial and commercial expansion accounted for much of the population growth.

"Townsville is more of a job-change than a sea-change city," he said. "Sure, there are those people who come here for the lifestyle, but the majority of people move north for employment."

"Townsville offers jobs to people in well-paying, rewarding careers. There were more than 1500 jobs on offer in Townsville last week and about 80 per cent of them are permanent."

Many of those jobs have been advertised by businesses that have grown with the local economy and, in turn, elevated some Townsville residents to among the state's wealthiest.

Even so, discovering the suburb of Castle Hill had the highest median household income in the state —

about \$2700 a week — surprised Mr Dwyer.

"Most people would think it was a Brisbane suburb or that it was a coal-mining area," he said. "It's a sign of a prosperous community that we can accommodate those people and deliver those incomes."

Townsville's prosperity and the more relaxed north Queensland lifestyle lured Emily Caldwell from Victoria to branch out with her event marketing business.

"I'd been working in Melbourne and looking to diversify the business," she said.

"I saw Townsville as an area that would continue to grow. Up here we can spend more time training people and less time travelling to our destination, so it can be a lot more profitable too."

The lifestyle lured Catherine Drake, husband Bryan and their three children from Melbourne.

Her mother grew up in Townsville and her grandmother still lives there. Mrs Drake grew up in Hoppers Crossing, west of Melbourne, and had visited Townsville four times in 15 years before the move last year.

"Bryan was working for the electricity commission in Melbourne and when we were up here two years ago he contacted Ergon and they said there was a job and he should apply for it," Mrs Drake said.

"There's work here, I've got a job as a teacher's aide after 13 years of being away from it."

Townsville's economic growth has Mrs Drake confident there's a future for her children in the city.

"We've seen it growing just in the time we've been here... a little bit of growth is good... but the lifestyle was definitely the carrot that attracted us."



**NORTHERN EXPOSURE:** Emily Caldwell is expanding her business