

DRAFT STATE PLANNING POLICY 2026

Planning for Queensland's night-time and dawn economies

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A NEW DAWN FOR THE SPP

This Insight examines the Draft State Planning Policy 2026's introduction of the night-time economy and the emerging dawn economy as planning outcomes to be actively facilitated through local planning instruments.

This represents a significant shift from the current State Planning Policy by treating economic activity across different times of the day as a land use planning issue, with implications for planning schemes, precinct planning, development assessment, amenity management and investment strategies.

We explore the practical consequences for local governments, developers and business operators, and consider how the new policy directions may shape future tourism, lifestyle and economic development outcomes across Queensland.

DRAFT STATE PLANNING POLICY 2026

Queensland's Draft State Planning Policy 2026 (**Draft SPP**) is out for consultation, until 26 October 2026. While the headline issues are housing supply and growth management, the Draft SPP also signals a more targeted planning shift: the express recognition of the **night-time economy** and the emerging concept of the **dawn economy** as outcomes to be facilitated through local planning.

For local governments, developers and operators, the practical significance is that the Draft SPP does more than acknowledge these activities as economic or tourism opportunities. It frames them as land use planning and development outcomes. This will matter for planning scheme drafting, precinct planning, development assessment, acoustic design, local law settings and investment strategy.

This direction is consistent with the State's broader tourism agenda, including *Destination 2045*, which identifies regulatory reform, safe after-dark experiences and reduced barriers for tourism operators as part of Queensland's long-term visitor economy strategy.

How is this different to the current State Planning Policy (2017)?

The treatment of the night-time and dawn economies is new. The current State Planning Policy 2017 contains no equivalent reference to either concept. The current SPP's tourism state interest is framed in more conventional terms: considering State-endorsed tourism studies and plans; identifying and protecting existing and potential tourism opportunities and locations; facilitating sustainable tourism where compatible with other land uses and values; and planning for supporting infrastructure.

The Draft SPP therefore represents a conceptual shift. Tourism is no longer treated only as a matter of place, assets, sustainability and infrastructure. It is also treated as a temporal land use issue: different parts of the day may generate different economic opportunities, amenity expectations and planning responses.



KEY PROPOSITIONS

- The Draft SPP recognises the night-time economy as a legitimate economic, cultural and tourism function that should be facilitated and protected through planning, rather than managed primarily as an amenity issue.
- The policy aligns with broader State initiatives, including the *Night-Life Economy Commissioner Act 2024* and the *Queensland Nightlife Economy Action Plan 2026-2032*, which encourage local governments to use planning and regulatory tools to support nightlife precincts.

THE NIGHT-TIME ECONOMY

The Draft SPP proposes that planning should facilitate a safe, vibrant and diverse night-time economy by supporting compatible clusters of land uses in centres and other night economy locations, protecting those locations from encroachment by sensitive land uses, and managing amenity impacts through buffers, separation, design and operational controls. This is a meaningful shift. The night-time economy is not treated only as a source of noise, complaints or late-night risk. It is recognised as a legitimate economic, cultural and tourism function that may warrant spatial protection.

In the Draft SPP, the night-time policy appears to carry a stronger strategic signal than the dawn economy policy. The Draft SPP's Figure 4 depicting key interactions of the tourism state interest with the draft SPP's strategic aspirations (a new feature) identifies '*Build more housing and strong communities by supporting investment in centres and the night-time economy, and by enhancing lifestyle and amenity, making places attractive to live, work and visit.*' This express strategic linkage does not appear to be made for the dawn economy, although could be inferred from the reference to enhancing lifestyle.

The *Night-Life Economy Commissioner Act 2024* (Qld) establishes an independent statutory office for Queensland's nocturnal sector. Under the Act, night-life businesses are exemplified as entertainment venues, festivals, hospitality venues, live music venues, theatres and arts venues. The Act defines the *night-life economy* by reference to economic activities at establishments that provide services mainly between 6pm and 6am, to persons for engaging in entertainment or leisure activities. Although that timeframe technically extends into the early morning, the legislative focus is on night-time entertainment and hospitality rather than the broader morning activity now captured by the Draft SPP's dawn economy policy.

The *Queensland Nightlife Economy Action Plan 2026–2032* reinforces that planning and regulatory implementation will sit heavily with local governments. It encourages councils to consider special entertainment precincts through planning scheme amendments and local laws regulating noise, and foreshadows Queensland Government support through a Nightlife Playbook to be developed with the local government sector.



KEY PROPOSITIONS

- Special entertainment precincts provide a regulatory mechanism that protects established entertainment activity by setting clear expectations for both venues and new sensitive development
- The Draft SPP introduces the dawn economy as a distinct planning concept focused on supporting safe, unique and diverse early-morning recreation and retail activity in centres, tourist areas and other suitable locations.

The Nightlife Economy Action Plan also points to precinct master planning, public realm investment, outdoor dining, parklets, temporary activations and the use of underutilised public assets as practical tools for activating nightlife precincts.

Special entertainment precincts

Special entertainment precincts are a part of this discussion. Under the *Local Government Act 2009*, a special entertainment precinct is an area where amplified music from licensed venues is regulated by local law rather than under the *Liquor Act 1992*, and where planning instrument noise attenuation requirements apply to certain types of development. To establish one, a local government must identify the precinct in its planning scheme and make a local law regulating amplified music within the precinct.

The mechanism is significant because it can reverse the usual dynamic between venues and later-arriving sensitive uses. Rather than allowing new residential development to create pressure on established entertainment activity, a special entertainment precinct can set clearer expectations: venues operate within a local law framework, while new sensitive development is designed with the precinct's intended acoustic environment in mind.

There are special entertainment precincts in Brisbane, Nambour and the Gold Coast (in the Southport PDA) and one earmarked in Ipswich. For local governments reviewing planning schemes in light of the Draft SPP, special entertainment precincts may become a more attractive tool. They provide a way to align strategic intent, acoustic standards, local law permits and development assessment expectations in a single precinct-based framework. For developers and operators, they can provide greater certainty about both opportunity and constraint.

THE DAWN ECONOMY

The more novel concept is the dawn economy. The Draft SPP proposes to support Queensland's 'early-rising culture' by facilitating a safe, unique and diverse dawn economy, including through compatible clustering of land uses in centres, tourist areas and other locations that accommodate dawn recreation and retail activity.



KEY PROPOSITIONS

- The dawn economy reflects growing demand for early-morning economic and social activity driven by Queensland's climate, tourism, lifestyle and commuting patterns, rather than simply being an extension of nightlife.
- Both the dawn and night-time economy policies rely on identifying activity clusters, protecting them from encroachment and managing amenity impacts, although each focuses on different forms of activity and planning challenges.

The term is still unfamiliar in many planning instruments. In practical terms, it captures early morning economic and social activity: often cafes, wellness and fitness, recreation, groceries, convenience retail, tourism experiences, commuter services and public realm activity. It is not simply nightlife brought forward. It reflects different patterns of demand, shaped by climate, lifestyle, tourism, transport and daily routines.

The policy logic is clear in Queensland. Coastal recreation, early commuting patterns, climate-responsive lifestyles and tourism all support activity before the conventional working day. The planning question is whether planning instruments recognise and enable that activity, or unintentionally constrain it through assumptions built around standard business hours.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE DRAFT POLICIES

The draft policies for the night-time and dawn economies use the same basic structure. Each seeks to support clusters of compatible activity, protect those locations from encroachment by sensitive uses, and manage amenity through buffers, separation distances and operational controls. In that sense, both policies ask local planning instruments to do the same essential job: identify where activity should occur, protect those places, and manage the interface.

The difference lies in the activity being protected. The night-time economy is more naturally associated with entertainment, hospitality, live performance, licensed venues, centre vitality and later-hour movement. It also carries a stronger express link to investment in centres, housing, community strength, lifestyle and amenity. The dawn economy is framed differently: it is about Queensland's early-rising culture, with a focus on recreation, retail, tourism, wellness, commuting and morning public realm activity.

For local governments, this means the night economy is likely to raise more acute questions about acoustic design, patron movement, safety and residential interfaces, while the dawn economy may require closer attention to early servicing, transport connections, public space management, recreation conflicts and tourism precinct activation.



KEY PROPOSITIONS

- ▮ The Draft SPP adopts different drafting approaches for each policy, with the night-time economy carrying a stronger strategic emphasis through express links to housing, community strength and centre activation.
- ▮ Local governments will need to undertake more deliberate spatial planning, identifying where these economies should occur and introducing planning controls and local law settings that balance activation and amenity.

A comparison of the drafting treatment of the two policies in the Draft SPP is summarised below:

	Dawn economy policy	Night-time economy policy
Policy verb	‘support’	‘facilitate’
Descriptor	‘safe, unique and diverse’	‘safe, vibrant and diverse’
Specific activities named	Dawn recreation and retail activities	No specific activities named
Location scope	Centres, tourist areas , and other areas	Centres and other areas
Amenity management tools	Buffers, separate distances, and operational controls	Buffers, separation distances, design , and operational controls
Linked to a strategic aspiration	Not expressly	‘Build more housing and strong communities’

Implications for local governments

The Draft SPP points to a need for more deliberate spatial planning. It will not be enough to rely on generic centre activation language. Local governments will need to identify where night-time and dawn economy activity is intended to occur, how those areas interface with housing and accommodation, and what planning scheme provisions are needed to protect both activation and amenity.

That could affect strategic frameworks, local plans, zone purposes, precinct provisions, use definitions, levels of assessment, overlays and development codes. It may also require closer alignment between planning schemes and local laws, particularly where amplified music, outdoor dining, late-night trading, early morning servicing or event activity is intended.



KEY PROPOSITIONS

- The Draft SPP strengthens the policy basis for protecting established activity precincts from conflicts with new sensitive uses, particularly through acoustic design, attenuation and precinct-specific expectations.
- Developers and business operators may be able to leverage the new policy framework to support proposals centred on activation, tourism, placemaking, wellness, recreation, hospitality and other precinct-based economic activity.

The most difficult issue will often be the interface with sensitive uses. The Draft SPP's language about protecting night-time and dawn economy locations from encroachment by sensitive land uses suggests a stronger basis for acoustic attenuation, design responses, disclosure mechanisms and precinct-specific expectations for new residential or short-term accommodation development. This will sharpen the policy balance between housing delivery and centre activation. Higher density living in centres remains important, but the Draft SPP indicates that new sensitive uses should not undermine the economic, cultural and tourism functions that make those centres attractive in the first place.

Brisbane City Council has already moved in some direction, announcing a commitment to develop a Dawn Economy Plan as part of its 2026–27 Budget. That initiative appears to treat early morning activity as a precinct and economic development issue, not merely a question of trading hours. Its focus on business support, transport and infrastructure connectivity, tourism and investment messaging, and stronger links between precincts provides an early example of how local governments may respond to the Draft SPP's dawn economy policy in practice across initiatives.

Implications for developers and business operators

For developers, the Draft SPP creates a stronger policy basis to frame proposals around activation, tourism, economic development and place-making. Mixed-use projects, short-term accommodation, entertainment and hospitality venues, wellness and recreation facilities, food and drink uses, markets and public realm activations may all be able to draw support from the new policy direction.

The dawn economy also creates a new planning and commercial narrative for uses that are not traditionally described as part of an entertainment economy. Early-opening cafes, fitness studios, surf and recreation operators, wellness facilities, local retail, farmers' markets, commuter services and tourism experiences can all contribute to precinct vitality before the conventional working day begins.

For business operators, the opportunity is broader than longer trading hours. It is participation in precinct-based planning, business support, infrastructure planning and local law reform directed to more flexible, safe and economically productive centres.



KEY PROPOSITIONS

- Amenity management remains central to both policies, requiring proponents to demonstrate that activation can coexist with liveability through appropriate design, operational and management measures.
- The new policies signal a State preference for planning schemes to actively enable economic, tourism and lifestyle activity across a broader span of the day, creating opportunities for place-based and evidence-led development.



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Managing amenity will remain central

The Draft SPP does not suggest that activation should occur at any cost. Each outcome is tied to amenity management. For night-time uses, the focus will remain on noise, patron behaviour, lighting, transport, safety, waste and servicing. For dawn economy uses, the issues may be quieter but still material: early deliveries, vehicle movements, waste collection, lighting, public realm maintenance and nearby residential amenity. Applicants should therefore be able to demonstrate both the benefits and the controls. Acoustic reports, operational management plans, lighting design, transport and access strategies, waste arrangements and clear hours of operation proposals will be important in showing that activation, liveability and amenity can co-exist.

Assessment benchmarks

The tourism state interest under which the dawn economy and night-time economy sit in the Draft SPP is not among the five state interests covered by the Assessment Benchmarks Discussion Paper. The tourism state interest doesn't have assessment benchmarks under the current SPP nor does it in the Draft SPP. Rather, the tourism state interest operates at the plan-making level. Local governments must integrate it into their planning schemes, but there are no associated State benchmarks that apply at the development assessment stage.

Why this matters

The Draft SPP's night-time and dawn economy outcomes are concise, but their effect could be significant. They indicate a State policy preference for planning schemes to enable economic, tourism and lifestyle activity across a wider span of the day, rather than treating those activities as exceptions to be controlled.

For local governments, the task will be to translate the policy direction into clear precinct planning, interface controls and local law settings. For developers and operators, the opportunity will be greatest where proposals are place-based, evidence-led and designed to show that activation and amenity are not competing objectives, but mutually reinforcing elements of successful centres and destinations.

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