

Comment on the New Residential Planning Zones and Plan Melbourne

Save Our Suburbs, June 2014

Will the new Neighbourhood Residential Zones (NRZ) & Plan Melbourne “lock up the suburbs” from necessary development? If so, is that a problem?

Will the new NRZ inhibit downsizing – the ability to move to smaller houses in the same suburb?

The aim of planning is to provide the necessary dwellings, infrastructure and services and protection for heritage, urban streetscapes and open space for agriculture, environmental conservation and recreation – sustainable development in the community interest. But current plans are based on population growth of 1.7%pa for the next 35 years. That trend is unlikely to continue because of factors like rising unemployment (particularly for youth), the need for greater reduction in GHG emissions, a large infrastructure backlog and growing community concern about the negative environmental, economic and societal effects of population pressure. (1)

In terms of the ageing population, most retirees we speak to want to remain as long as possible in the family home – it’s their own territory and familiar surroundings for their grown-up children with families to visit. Often, they want to downsize only when they can no longer physically cope – and by that stage many may be looking for a retirement village or aged care facility. Earlier retirees or empty-nesters will still be able to find smaller units which are encouraged in the new General Residential Zones (GRZ) closer to service and transport nodes, which range from around 20% to 90% of the current R1Z areas of most municipalities.

While the minister has allowed some of the most conservative areas like Boroondara & Bayside to adopt a large proportion of NRZ, 24 municipalities will have their current R1Z area converted into the GRZ on July 1. Hence there’ll be plenty of scope for new units in the GRZ to cater for downsizers in the same suburbs they currently live in.

Developer profit margins for units in the GRZ may be less than for NRZ areas, but planning is for the benefit and needs of the community, not the private profit of speculative developers seeking to exploit the most lucrative opportunities.

The flood of complaints about “locked up suburbs” is largely from private planning professionals & property developers who stand to benefit financially from increased development in the low-rise leafy suburbs where units can be sold at a premium. They cite housing affordability to justify their position, but affordability is largely dependent on negative gearing, land banking by development corporations drip-feeding the market to inflate prices, and cashed-up foreign investors forcing first-home buyers out of the market. Furthermore, single storey units in the backyard would be more affordable & accessible for older downsizers who’d prefer no stairs.

What those with vested interests fail to discuss is the need for much of our suburban area to be protected with respect to green open space and neighbourhood character. While more housing through urban sprawl should not be allowed for obvious social, agricultural, energy and infrastructure reasons, as a society we must also balance suburban densification with suburban amenity values – not only proximity to transport and services but also the maintenance of large treed backyards and single or double-storey neighbourhood character for social, psychological, health, aesthetic and biodiversity reasons.

New development involves health and social issues as well as demographics. 45% of the adult population in Melbourne is already deficient in vitamin D from insufficient sunshine and outdoor activity, due partly to lifestyle issues associated with oversized houses with small backyards and too much overshadowing by neighbouring houses and apartment blocks.

Kids need safe supervised playing areas involving some interaction with nature. Well-treed areas reduce air pollution and combat the heat island effect by improving local microclimates (2). Provision of green open space also correlates with better mental health. Street trees alone don't meet most of these increasing needs.

Social impacts are mandatory considerations under s60 of the Planning and Environment Act, and Clause 11 of all planning schemes recognises health and safety issues. As veteran social planner Bernadette George stated recently, "you'd hope by now that planners would be taking a more informed, respectful approach to what concerned residents have long been upset about: losing their trees and sunshine" (3).

Unfortunately, the "protection of backyards" that Minister Guy promised back in 2012 is largely illusory because all NRZ areas will allow at least 2 dwellings per lot. In some cases (eg Darebin), subdivision into more than 2 lots will be directly permitted in a NRZ:

"The number of dwellings on a lot must not exceed:

- *Two if the lot is less than 900 sqm*
- *Three if the lot is between 900 sqm and 1000 sqm*
- *Four plus one dwelling for each additional 250 sqm for lots over 1001 sqm."*

Many councils have specified small minimum lot sizes, some only 250 sqm. And even where only 2 lot subdivisions are permitted, both dwellings can be 2-storey (unless limited by DDOs) which in most cases will be a further intensification - eg, in Glen Eira's previous minimal change residential areas (now NRZ), a second unit at the rear was usually required by council and even at VCAT to be single storey to preserve "backyard-scape".

And to circumvent the limit on the number of units per lot, large lots in some municipalities could be subdivided sequentially, each time with only 2 houses per lot, until the minimum lot size was reached (typically 300 - 500m²). Some councils haven't even specified a minimum subdivision area, like Frankston. So there are a number of "loopholes" that mean a greater density of development will occur in NRZ areas than at first glance.

On top of these vagaries with the implementation of the new residential zones, the new Plan Melbourne strategy ignores the wider sociological, environmental and health issues outlined above. It was not developed through informed participatory community consultation and it no longer focuses on the regulation of planning but on the facilitation of development and on the highly controversial and uneconomic East West tollway Link. While disproportionate attention is focused on road infrastructure, little has been done to improve the functionality, integration and frequency of suburban public transport. This should be the highest priority if the plan for denser development along transport corridors and around stations is not to lead to even worse congestion than at present.

The East West Link in particular will destroy large parts of our classic heritage of Royal Park; it will only return 80 cents in the dollar and a few years after it's built, create even worse traffic congestion. Not only does experience here and overseas tell us that freeways stimulate traffic flow and encourage more motorists to depend on them, there's even a well-established scientific theory that explains it - the Downs-Thompson Paradox. The key to reducing road congestion is not more

roads but reducing traffic flow by building rail links in parallel with freeways to attract commuters back to rail - that lowers rail costs/head and frees up arterial roads for those who need to use them - trucks, commercial vehicles and multi-destination vehicles. (4)

In terms of the inner city, we now have a slew of applications for excessively tall apartment tower blocks being approved by the minister within the virtually unregulated Capital City Zone, especially Fishermans Bend and the northern end of the CBD (5). The excellent Fishermans Bend Vision document developed with wide community consultation only months ago was summarily discarded when the minister suddenly relocated the already-finalised plan for the Metro Rail Loop further south to serve the new Montague station where most new towers will be located.

The underlying short-term political reason for this policy change appears to be to focus on stimulating the construction industry to maintain traditional economic growth in the face of the mining industry downturn – with the likely added benefit of an increased flow of donations to party election coffers from grateful developers.

So the “locked up suburbs” argument has everything to do with vested private interests and little to do with catering for demographic increase. Most lots in the new NRZ can be developed over time into twice as many dwellings, more apartment clusters can be built in the new GRZ and RGZ, and higher densities can be achieved in activity centres and on brownfield sites in Mixed Use, Commercial and Comprehensive Development Zones. And we already have a burgeoning glut of apartments in the city - although many of the newer projects feature substandard size apartments that are likely to become the housing slums of the future

Metro-wide rail, tram and bus transport must be improved to make Melbourne and its suburbs function much better, to reduce travel times and traffic congestion. We also have record youth unemployment and a never-ending task in maintaining and increasing infrastructure to match current population growth rates. And all this while trying to reduce our carbon footprint to meet what will only become more and more stringent national and international requirements for climate change adaptation.

The only sustainable solution is to open the population and planning debate up to full community scrutiny in a participatory consultation process with all shades of expert opinion represented, resulting in decisions by the wider community that must be largely binding on the government of the day. Only then can we end up with a balanced, bipartisan planning strategy to meet both the expectations of the city’s inhabitants as well as future economic and environmental challenges.

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President, Save Our Suburbs, June 2014

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(3) Bernadette George, *Planning News*, May 2014, p26

(4) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Downs-Thomson_paradox

(5) <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/city-rezone-reaps-millions-20130623-2oqr6.html>