

# Residents' Voice



Issue 30, November 2013 \* ISSN 1440-6977, Publication of Save Our Suburbs Inc (Vic) No.A0036067S  
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## President's Address

It's now even more necessary for better planning controls because we are reaching limits to growth that are being felt increasingly across the city – worse traffic congestion, increasingly inadequate public transport and

other infrastructure, higher house prices, less open space, fewer trees and a growing obesity epidemic.

We don't need high density for community cohesion, mental health and a sense of belonging - but we do need things like a connection between public street space and private dwellings, accessible local services and green open space (absent in many hi-rise areas).

How about Environmentally Sustainable Development? There are strong arguments for higher density precincts because they can increase walkability and decrease car use, but that can only be effective if adequate public transport is provided FIRST as a viable and convenient alternative. But there are also environmental & sustainability arguments in favour of lower density living – including the psychological, health & economic benefits of green open space with large trees, home-grown vegies, and minimising the heat island effect, over-crowding and "battery kids".

Then there's democracy – what do most people want? Although the Grattan Institute found that many people in Melbourne and Sydney favour apartments and semi-detached homes, a recent MacroPlan survey of Doncaster residents found 70% of respondents didn't want to downsize, 17.7% wanted a detached house, 7.2% a villa unit or townhouse, 3.3% a nursing home or retirement village, 0.9% a flat or apartment, and 0.9% weren't sure. So demand for apartment-style living in the middle suburbs may be very low. Should the government legislate changes in residential density?

What about transport? Nearly all growth is now served by private transport (hence our worsening congestion problems). Upgrading public transport could improve commuting time for both rail and road travel, but so far there is little state or federal political will to do so.

Clearly, there will need to be some substantial deliberative community consultation if Melbournians are

to find realistic and sustainable solutions to our current constraints and challenges.

## ***SOS meets Justice Garde, Head of VCAT***

SOS had a cordial meeting in March with Justice Greg Garde, the current head of VCAT, but so far without any concrete results. We also produced several detailed submissions this year, including a critique of the draft Metro Planning Strategy:

<<http://sos.asn.au/sites/default/files/images/SOS-Comment%20on%20MPS.pdf>>

This year after a brief review, the State Government announced large increases in most VCAT fees - a "user-pays" approach – which contradicts the original purpose of VCAT as a "low cost, efficient, cost-effective and accessible" tribunal.

We argued that Instead of simplistic, exorbitant and discriminatory user-pays solutions, other necessary VCAT reforms should be pursued that would not only introduce more certainty and compliance in permit assessments at both council and VCAT but also reduce the number and length of cases in the VCAT P&E List with significant cost savings, without compromising the fairness of outcomes nor the accessibility of justice.

See our suggested VCAT reforms on the SOS website: <[http://sos.asn.au/sites/default/files/images/Sub-VCAT\\_fees\\_SOS.pdf](http://sos.asn.au/sites/default/files/images/Sub-VCAT_fees_SOS.pdf)>.

The new exorbitant VCAT fee schedules are at: <<http://www.vcat.vic.gov.au/resources/document/vcat-fees-effective-1-july-2013>>

## **New SOS signs!**



Signs are \$20 (or one each for SOS members for \$15).  
To order, go to: [www.sos.asn.au/faq](http://www.sos.asn.au/faq)

## Stop Press!

**McDONALD'S has agreed to drop legal action against eight protesters fighting its controversial development in Tecoma, provided they avoid nuisance and trespass tactics in future protests (*Herald Sun*, 30 Oct. 13). The fast food giant struck the deal with Maurice Blackburn lawyers defending the "Tecoma Eight", promising to abandon suing the protesters over construction delays, including legal costs, additional security costs and potential loss of income.**

## “PLAN MELBOURNE” – A LOST OPPORTUNITY FOR COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

As history shows, both in Melbourne and overseas, a City Plan without the support of most of its citizens is a recipe for conflict and instability. Unfortunately, the Metro Planning Strategy (MPS) public consultation process has been woefully inadequate in educating the community about the planning issues facing Melbourne, and their possible solution.

The PlanMelbourne website devoted to launching the public “debate and consultation” on the new MPS was restricted to comment on the predetermined principles in the online discussion forums and in the MPS Discussion Paper, “Melbourne, Let’s talk about the Future”, scoped last year with no community input. Public users of the site were unable to initiate threads in the online forums and there was more focus on a twitter feed and a photo competition than on relevant facts and informed debate.

The site was also notable for its failure to identify trends over time or in relation to vital strategic concepts like the function of activity centres. As veteran planner Alan Davies commented on the 1-page “Economy Fact Sheet”, *“It reads like no one in DPCD actually has any real idea how planning relates to the economy”*. (<http://blogs.crikey.com.au/theurbanist/2012/05/08/is-melbournes-metropolitan-strategy-off-to-a-bad-start/>)

The site did offer the opportunity for people to host their own discussions and surveys but even this was predetermined – the “conversation toolkit” for community groups also focused on just responding to the MPS Discussion Paper, with instructions for submitting the information collected back to DPCD.

### THE DOCKLANDS “DELIBERATIVE” FORUM

To cap off this “public consultation”, DPCD organized a major forum at Docklands on March 2 (postponed from February 23 only a few weeks before the event). For months, the public had the opportunity via the under-promoted PlanMelbourne website to register for the promised “consultation events in early 2013”. But there was only one event, and those who registered weren’t

notified about it until less than 3 weeks beforehand, some just a day or so before the event.

Perhaps this was an attempt to discourage website registrants who were community activists - interested enough in planning to be aware of the website and then to register to be notified of coming “events”.

In the end, the website event registration process resulted in only a few hundred takers so in the last few weeks, Lynette Griffiths Market Research Services was commissioned to “attract attendees from a wide demographic range”. Hundreds of focus group contacts were offered \$50 a head for travel expenses to attend the forum. At the conclusion of the event, all 600-odd participants were paid the same amount – an extra cost of over \$30,000 just to get people to turn up.

After speeches by then Premier Baillieu and Minister Guy, discussion focused on two pre-determined MPS topics (housing and the 20 minute city) with only one speaker for each, both from the MPS Ministerial Advisory Committee and arguing the government line.



*The Docklands Metro Planning Strategy forum in March this year – billed as a deliberative consultation but more of a tightly directed media event*

In hindsight, a cynic might suggest that these topics were designed to elicit simplistic positive support for the Coalition’s deregulatory approach to planning in general. The “20 minute City” arguments in particular appeared to be designed to facilitate implementation of the new planning zones with their blurred distinctions regarding appropriate location of land use activities.

But commentators have pointed out that a policy that seeks to locate jobs, services and residential locations closer to each other, while sounding beneficial, misunderstands the way cities evolve and function.

To quote Alan Davies again, *“Paradoxically, we’ve already got it (the 20-minute city) and it’s unachievable. We’ve already got it because there are very few places in Melbourne, even the outer suburbs, where you can’t already get to a supermarket, hair-dresser or GP within a 20 minute drive... On the other hand, it’s unachievable because there are some higher-level activities that simply can’t be distributed evenly across the entire metropolitan area so that they’re within a short walk, bus ride or drive of almost every household.”*

*“The implicit idea that a key mission of planning in a city of 4, 5 or 6 million people is to promote “living locally” as the headline objective, is to misunderstand what a city is about. Cities offer specialisation and that means higher level activities aren’t evenly spread like hairdressers and supermarkets are, but tend to be geographically concentrated.”*

[\(http://blogs.crikey.com.au/theurbanist/2012/12/03/should-the-20-minute-city-be-the-key-objective-of-planning/\)](http://blogs.crikey.com.au/theurbanist/2012/12/03/should-the-20-minute-city-be-the-key-objective-of-planning/)



*PlanMelbourne – less urban sprawl (above)..... but more of this (below).....:*



## TOKENISM

There has been no attempt by the coalition government to encourage or engage a wide range of independent or critical planning professionals to formally contribute to what should have been a series of deliberative public consultation events to consider a range of scenarios and alternative solutions in relation to the various draft policies and legislation.

Instead, the state government has honed “planning by media release” down to a fine art to avoid critical scrutiny – new planning legislation or policy is either released virtually unannounced, or released via media release or press conference with little background information, often before strategic documentation has been made available on the DPCD website. Third parties don’t have enough information to answer media inquiries, and by the time details have been made available, it’s old news.

This tokenistic community consultation lends weight to rumors (and personal feedback from a senior individual “on the inside”) that the metro planning strategy had already been drafted, and that the whole consultation process was little more than a PR exercise. This could explain why subordinate policy such as VicSmart, the Planning Act amendments and the new zones were finalized prior to the MPS being produced.

The planning debate over the last few years has been full of earnest statements from planning organisations (from the Grattan Institute to even the Property Council itself) arguing that the community must be effectively consulted if the new planning reforms are going to stand the test of time. Yet despite the Minister’s rhetoric, only a sham community consultation process was undertaken and the opportunity to create public and bi-partisan ownership of the new planning strategy has been lost.

## THE NEED FOR GENUINE CONSULTATION

The urgent need to address issues like unprecedented population pressure, congestion, climate change and lagging infrastructure provision demands a far stronger and more transparent democratic response to planning reform. As the Urbanisation Council of the World Economic Forum (WEC) warned last year:

*Humanity is rapidly urbanizing, but will its cities be ready? In the face of historic worldwide migration that could lead to 80% of all people living in urban areas by 2050, cities will be hard-pressed to provide basic urban services. Clean water, efficient transportation and reliable electricity cannot be ensured in the future for any city - rich or poor - without massive investments to build or repair infrastructure. In almost all urban areas, decisions on allocating resources for infrastructure will shape the options available for other urban concerns: public health, crime and economic development.*  
[<www.weforum.org/content/global-agenda-council-urbanization-2012>]

The WEC report “More with Less: Scaling Sustainable Consumption and Resource Efficiency” concluded: *“Current trends clearly show that business as usual no longer works. Unless the present link between growth and the consumption of scarce resources is severed, our resource base, governance and policy structures are unlikely to sustain the standard of living societies have grown accustomed to or indeed aspire to. Action to decouple business and economic growth from resource intensity and environmental impact has never been more critical to long term business success.”*  
[<www.weforum.org/reports/more-less-scaling-sustainable-consumption-and-resource-efficiency>]

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Similarly, new US research confirms a disconnect between population growth and productivity growth, that high population growth rates correlate with significant declines in productivity. Over a decade ago, urban economist Paul Gottlieb dubbed this "growth without growth", where population growth creates a fake illusion of prosperity.

Another comprehensive report (in the Journal of the American Planning Association last year) reveals that, contrary to popular urban consolidation theory, the change to white-collar lifestyles and associated population growth dominates the impacts on the natural environment and resources, overwhelming those due to spatial urban form. While urban form policies can have important impacts on local environmental quality, the economy, crowding and social equity, their influence on energy consumption and land use is actually modest. Compact development should not automatically be associated with the preferred spatial growth strategy.

So there are no easy solutions. An on-going community-wide and bi-partisan consultative effort will be required to address these major structural issues which will only be exacerbated by business as usual.

### Submissions - Draft Plan Melbourne:

**Opportunities to comment on Plan Melbourne close at 5pm on Friday 6 December 2013.**

We encourage you all to make a submission so the government knows we are all concerned. You may want to just briefly reinforce concerns about the lack of real public consultation and bi-partisan support. To make a submission, go to:

<http://www.planmelbourne.vic.gov.au/get-involved/make-a-submission>

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## The New Residential Zones – a brief update

The New Zones Review Committee terms of reference appeared to pre-empt the outcome of the public consultation process for the review of the planning system. Late last year when SOS met the Committee, we stressed that it was hard to provide constructive criticism of the proposed new zones because of the lack of background information, the fact that there was no final draft Metro Planning Strategy, and in particular the variable ways councils will be able to implement the new residential zones by determining where they will go and what conditions and constraints will be included in the schedules to each zone.

Some councils have already implemented their new residential zones and we can now see these variations in approach. Glen Eira, the first cab off

the rank, has simply used its decade-old Housing Diversity Policy to allocate the three new zones, applying the Neighbourhood Residential Zone to around 80% of its municipality. Little has actually changed except the mandatory 8m height limit instead of the old discretionary 9m, and a limit of 2 dwellings per lot, similar to the old policy in practice.

Boroondara has also placed around 80% of its municipality into the new Neighbourhood Residential Zone.

But other Councils have made significant changes. Draft new residential zones in Frankston have no minimum subdivision area so the limit of 2 dwellings/lot is a bit meaningless, and could also allow larger sites to be subdivided a second or third time. An innocuous-looking paragraph in the Frankston draft NRZ schedule also means that the pre-existence of one building in excess of the new maximum mandatory height limit can now allow another of similar excess height to be built next to it, which could lead to a domino effect of taller buildings, particularly at zone boundaries.

In Kingston, the 10 schedules of the draft NRZ taken together will homogenise all residential areas because larger lots will be allowed to accommodate more dwellings at 1 per 300sqm, so eventually the lot size for all dwellings will be reduced down to around 300-500sqm.

One emerging trend is that councils in Liberal electorates seem to be protecting their residential areas more strongly than Labor ones.

**So check how your council is planning to implement the new residential zones – contact your local councilors and have a say in where the new zones will go, and what mandatory heights and other controls may apply in zone schedules.....**

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**Reminder - SOS 2013 AGM  
Sunday 24th Nov 2013, 2:45pm. Meeting  
Room 1, ground floor, Ross House**

**Guest Speaker – Dr Carolyn Whitzman**

Dr Whitzman is Associate Professor in Urban Planning at the University of Melbourne. She has lived in Australia for 10 years and previously worked for the City of Toronto. She recently wrote several controversial but constructive articles for "The Age", including "How to make Melbourne even more marvellous". She will talk about the shortcomings of current government planning reforms and outline some positive solutions