

What do we want our cities to be like in 2025?  
John McKerral looks at the issues confronting a  
House of Representatives committee as it investigates  
the options for making our cities more liveable.

**T**he House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage has commenced an inquiry into *Sustainable Cities 2025*. This is an important decision—one might well say a ‘courageous’ one.

The terms of reference are wide-ranging. The committee will inquire into:

- the environmental and social aspects of sprawling urban development;
- the major determinants of urban settlement patterns and desirable patterns of development for the growth of Australian cities;
- a ‘blueprint’ for ecologically sustainable patterns of settlement, with particular reference to eco-efficiency and equity in the provision of services and infrastructure;
- measures to reduce the environmental, social and economic costs of continuing urban expansion; and
- mechanisms for the Commonwealth to bring about urban development reform and promote ecologically sustainable patterns of settlement.

It is a daunting list.



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In late 1998 the Warren Centre for Advanced Engineering at the University of Sydney resolved to undertake a study into urban transport, using Sydney as a model. Quickly it became evident that the core question had to be sustainable transport. Before long, it also became evident that it was impossible to look at urban transport without looking very hard at its interaction with urban planning issues, so the title and scope of the project changed to Sustainable Transport in Sustainable Cities. Over 100 contributed technical papers, several intense workshops, expenditure of \$4 million (mostly in donated professional time) and three and a half years later, the Warren Centre issued its final report on this project, the largest ever undertaken by the centre in its 20-year history.

During the currency of the project, a vast array of issues was discussed and documented, including:

- the expectations of the community in the areas of both transport and land use management;
- public health issues such as cancer, obesity and heart disease;
- how to provide a better bus system;
- the role of private finance in public infrastructure;
- inequity in the distribution of cultural and social services in a population of four million people;
- the issues facing urban freight transporters;
- urban villages;
- decentralisation;
- mixed-land-use zoning;
- alternative structures for managing government planning and service provision; and
- various established and emerging technologies.

An inquiry such as the one being conducted by the House of Representatives Environment and Heritage Committee cannot fail to generate submissions on all these issues and many more.

In order to provide a helpful introduction to the inquiry, I would like to comment, in order, on each of the five points in the terms of reference, drawing on my experience with the Warren Centre project. Hopefully I will be able to indicate some of the key issues associated with each point and suggest some fruitful lines for contributors to the inquiry to follow up.

But first, some comment is called for on the inquiry's time-frame. By this I mean the

time over which contributors are expected to project their predictions, rather than the time allotted to conduct the inquiry. What is a suitable time-frame for an inquiry such as this? In some respects 25 years is a very long time for looking ahead. In other respects 25 years is too short. Ideally the time-frame should be long enough for participants to be confident that their expectations, whether positive or negative, will come to pass within it. It should be long enough, too, to encourage strategic thinking about underlying issues, not simply quick-fix solutions to current irritations. In these respects, 25 years is a comfortable time frame. Fifty years would be better, but few of us are brave enough, or foolish enough, to speculate on the future 50 years ahead and, frankly, many of us won't be around then, so it is hard to take the 50-year scenario too seriously.

Is there merit in discussing what our cities will, or should, be like much closer to now, say 10 years in the future or even five? Probably yes, but only in the context of a longer strategic framework.

Sometimes a historical perspective is instructive. In 1919, at the end of World War I, there was a mood of optimism abroad. The League of Nations was founded and it was confidently predicted by many that the world was on the road to a better and brighter future. A futurologist writing in 1919 and looking ahead 25 years would describe the world in 1944. How many would have foreseen the worldwide economic crisis that was the Great Depression, the complete change in the social structure of Russia, the re-emergence of Germany as a military power after its crushing and humiliating defeat? How many would have seen the change in Japan from being an inward looking nation to an ambitious expansionist empire, the United States' significant change from a country with an isolationist foreign policy, and the outbreak of World War II?

How many would have predicted the inexorable rise of the automobile as the dominant mode of urban transport and the major impact this would have on the size, form and shape of cities throughout the world immediately World War II was over?

There are two ways of looking into the future. The traditional way, the one with the greater risk of error, is to examine the present and the past and to extrapolate recorded trends into the future. If we don't like the answer that this gives then we try

to change the predictions by manipulating the trend lines to bring the future closer to one we like. The alternative approach is to go straight to the future.

Ask yourselves, "What is the future we really want?" rather than "What is the future we are about to be given?" This is best done in workshops, so that the pessimists and the optimists balance each other out. Imagine this future, talk about it in the present tense. Think about the things that make such a future comfortable to live in.

Then come back to the present. Does what we have today differ very much from the future we have imagined? In what ways is it different? Is it radically different or are the differences only matters of degree? Can we get to such a future from where we are now? I am reminded of a very old and very corny joke along the following lines. A tourist in Ireland asks a local rustic the way to Dublin (substitute whatever national stereotypes you use when telling jokes). "Well sir," replies the rustic after much thought, "If I were going to Dublin I wouldn't be starting from here."

Unfortunately, that is not an option. We have to start from here. The real question is, "Are we serious about going to Dublin?"

Once we know clearly where we want to go, it is often a good strategy to work backwards from there and see if the rustic is right and it is not possible to find a suitable road from here. Surprisingly, looking at the future in this way can open up many possibilities as to how we can get a much better one, rather than one that is only slightly different from what we have today.

Like it or not, what we have today is the outcome of our past. Our future must be an outcome of our present. We don't need to accept the future that the trend lines tell us we will be given. But we do have to start from here and we need to bring our past with us.

The other issue that I feel needs to be canvassed before we set out on this inquiry is, "What exactly are Australian cities?" Compared to other countries, our cities are very young. Our oldest city is just over 200 years old. Our national capital is only 90 years old. So in some respects our cities do not carry as much baggage from the past as most other cities in the world. Nevertheless, it is possible to accumulate a lot of baggage in 100 years. Just think about moving house after, say, 10 years. Where did all that stuff come from?

*Photo opposite page: photolibRARY.com Continued page 24*

# smart cities

What we have brought from our past may be stifling, inhibiting our move into the future, or it may be precious and we must fight to preserve it. There will be differing views on the class into which much of our physical and institutional heritage falls.

While Australia is a vast continent, the majority of its population lives in cities. According to the 2003 Year Book from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), in 2001 the total population of Australia was about 19.5 million people (now it is approaching 20 million) with an average

million people, a population greater than that of Brisbane, Adelaide or Perth. In fact this population is already close to that of Adelaide and Perth combined and is predicted to grow to three million people over the next 20 years, approaching the current population of Melbourne. Clearly a 'one size fits all' approach will not work when considering the needs of our urban population.

Turning now to the terms of reference for the inquiry, let us look at each matter to be considered in the order in which they are presented.

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population density of 2.5 people per square kilometre. Over 60 per cent of that population lived in the eight state or territory capitals, with 39 per cent in the largest two cities, Sydney and Melbourne, alone. When we consider also the 3.4 million people who live in the largest 35 non-capital cities, which have populations ranging from 29,500 to 494,400, over 80 per cent of Australia's population is urban.

The most densely populated areas of Australia are in Sydney, with up to 8,400 people per square kilometre in parts of the inner city, and in Melbourne, with up to 5,500 per square kilometre in St Kilda.

Let us think a little about the nature of our cities. The largest five, each with a population greater than one million, are all on the coast. Our largest inland city is Canberra-Queanbeyan with a population of only 364,400. Three of our conurbations, Gold Coast-Tweed, Canberra-Queanbeyan and Albury-Wodonga, straddle state boundaries, with all the bureaucratic problems that can engender.

Finally consider outer Sydney. This area, often dismissed contemptuously as urban sprawl would be, if not part of Sydney, a significant city in its own right. The southwest, west and northwest suburbs and the Central Coast together contain two

The first issue the inquiry is expected to address is "the environmental and social aspects of sprawling urban development". Where do we start? Clearly sprawling urban development has environmental and social aspects. One would be a fool to say otherwise. But what are they? Are they all bad? The emotive word 'sprawl' suggests that the form of development we currently see on the edges of Australian cities is unplanned and untidy—perhaps it is.

As part of its sustainable transport project, the Warren Centre carried out an attitudinal survey of a statistically selected sample of Sydney's population, probing what people's likes and dislikes were and what they wanted or didn't want in transport and in land use. Clearly many did not like sprawl, but equally clearly they did not like urban consolidation much either. The people surveyed were given a simple trade-off choice between two propositions, namely:

- Sydney is too big already and the sprawl must be slowed, even if this means more medium density housing, including in my suburb and even my street; and
- Sydney is too dense already and there should be no more homes built in established areas, even if this means more people living further out and long distances commuting.

Two-thirds of those surveyed favoured the second option, namely a preference for urban sprawl over consolidation.

When this choice was probed further with choice modelling, a more complex set of choices emerged. Participants were offered three housing policy options:

- most new developments are low-density housing in outer areas, with significant loss of natural bushland;
- new development includes some medium to high-rise housing across Sydney plus further low density housing in outer suburbs, with some loss of bushland; or
- most new developments would be medium-high-rise apartments in inner suburbs and near railway stations, but with retention of natural bushland.

Both the second and third propositions had positive utility, while the first proposition, which involved urban sprawl, had negative utility. Clearly, the anti-urban-consolidation attitudes expressed in the simple two-choice questioning became less firm when the choices on offer were expanded. The inquiry should delve further into the community's attitudes to both sprawl and consolidation.

The second of the inquiry's terms of reference is "the major determinants of urban settlement patterns and desirable patterns of development for the growth of Australian cities". How are we to deal with this?

Historically, trade (and hence transport) and the availability of suitable land and resources have been major determinants of where and how cities have developed. Defence has traditionally been a further determinant of the location and initial shape of cities. Even for young cities like Australia's these determinants seem to apply.

How cities grow, or fail to grow, is more complex. It seems the pattern of growth varies between countries. Quite different growth patterns appear to apply in Europe, Asia, North America and Australia. The forces at work include the national and city tax regimes, local planning laws, transport policies, the economy and the availability of land for redevelopment.

Among the patterns that can be observed are unplanned sprawl, urban renewal, urban consolidation, declining inner cities coupled with the development of fringe cities, planned new towns, decentralisation, and the development of either greenfield or brownfield sites.

As the ABS 2003 Year Book reports, "in 2000-01, Victoria, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory recorded net interstate migration gains. All other states, and the Northern Territory, experienced net losses due to interstate migration, although this was offset in all cases by

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growth due to natural increase and net overseas migration.”

Sydney and Melbourne had the largest net increases in population of 273,600 and 205,500 respectively between 1996 and 2001. However, on a percentage basis, Darwin (2.5 per cent) and Brisbane (1.7 per cent) were the fastest growing capitals. Together, the eight capital cities accounted for 66 per cent of Australia's population growth in that period.

A comparatively recent phenomenon in Australia has been the growth in inner-city population. From the early 20th century the population of inner Sydney declined as first trams and then the electric railway allowed workers to move to the suburbs. After World War II, the flight to the suburbs accelerated as the automobile allowed development of new areas beyond the catchments of the tram and train systems. In the last few years, the flight from the inner city has been reversed. Between 1996 and 2001 the local government area (LGA) of Sydney (i.e. the Sydney CBD and its immediate surrounds) recorded Australia's highest LGA growth rate of an incredible 18.1 per cent per annum over five years.

People move between cities, or within cities, for a variety of reasons—family

changes, job opportunities, lifestyle changes and cost of housing. The relative importance of these reasons varies from time to time and from place to place.

As to the desirable patterns for urban development, these will also vary as the reasons people move change. An appropriate set of tests for any development pattern should be:

- does it provide housing choice;
- does it provide good access to a variety of services such as education, health care, shopping, recreation and employment;
- is it non-discriminatory;
- is it acceptable to the community;
- is it economically viable; and
- is it ecologically sustainable?

Any planning policy that satisfies these tests has a fair chance of being a good one.

The third term of reference seeks “a ‘blueprint’ for ecologically sustainable patterns of settlement, with particular reference to eco-efficiency and equity in the provision of services and infrastructure”. I must admit that the use of the word ‘blueprint’ in this context causes me some unease. As a student and as a new

graduate I became very familiar with blueprints. They used photosensitive paper and sunlight to create copies of plans drawn on transparent paper. Unfortunately they were unstable and could fade if not carefully looked after. Plan reproduction has moved on since those days and the word ‘blueprint’ has too. The Oxford Dictionary now includes a second definition—“detailed plan of work to be done”. I suspect this is the definition to which the committee's terms of reference relate.

Rather than a detailed plan, what is needed is a set of principles or tests that should be applied to planning policies, strategies and regional and local plans. The principles and tests will change as we become aware of new issues, or discover that current principles or tests do not work, or are even counter productive. At this point I can recall my early involvement in the approval of new property developments. One of the requirements for new hotels was the provision of adequate on-site parking. The practical consequence of this detail was the demise of inner city and suburban corner pubs and the transfer of their licences to greenfields hotels that could be reached only by car. Not a good outcome!

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## Inquiry Discussion Paper: Sustainable Cities 2025

As outlined in John McKerral's feature, to help ensure that Australian cities of the future are clean, liveable and accessible places, the House of Representatives Environment Committee is embarking on an inquiry examining the sustainability of Australian cities.

The inquiry is timely given that 2004 is the Year of the Built Environment, when there will be a national focus on the spaces we live in and how we improve the liveability of our cities and settlements.

To stimulate public discussion and input into the inquiry, a 20-page Discussion Paper has been released. It outlines objectives the committee may consider in developing a ‘blueprint’ for Australian sustainable cities.

For example:

- preservation of heritage and bushland;
- efficiency in energy usage;
- integrated water and stormwater management systems;
- management and minimisation of waste;
- sustainable and complementary transport networks;
- ‘green’ designs for buildings and housing developments; and
- urban design to meet lifestyle, social and business needs.



*Illustration: Pat Campbell*

Discussion points are made under each of those headings, with a series of questions posed.

“The sustainable city of the future will integrate the built and natural environment,” the Paper says. “The sustainable city will assist in retaining the biodiversity of Australia, have a developed infrastructure that gives efficient and equitable access to services and utilities, preserve the essentials of the ‘Australian lifestyle’ and contribute to the economic wealth of the nation.

“This future vision will not be achieved without planning and without a clearly articulated strategy.

“There are international initiatives to develop sustainable cities and to address many of the problems faced by expanding cities in both developed and developing nations. Local and State initiatives in Australia are also addressing specific sustainability issues for cities and urban settlements. The challenge remains for a more holistic national approach which integrates the components of an Australian sustainable city and provides a model which can be devolved to and adapted by state and local governments.”

Submissions to the inquiry are being sought by Friday 31 October 2003. After submissions have been considered, roundtable forums will be held to collect further evidence.

Further information, including advice on making submissions and obtaining copies of the Discussion Paper, can be found at the committee's website [www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/enviro](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/enviro) or by phoning the committee secretariat on (02) 6277 4580 or emailing [environment.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:environment.reps@aph.gov.au)

I have been wary of prescriptive planning ever since.

For a city to be equitable, its citizens need to be able to access the things they need—affordable housing, employment, education, medical services, shopping and recreation. Many things can stand in the way of a person being able to access these fundamentals—age, gender, physical or mental ability, income and physical location. An equitable city requires a proactive approach to removing barriers to accessibility, whether they are physical, institutional or financial.

This is not to say that our cities need to be homogeneous, but we must be wary of

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developing ghettos. We need to ensure that living in an outer suburb does not deprive a family of the cultural experiences available to those living near the city centre. At present, in Sydney, a lot of government spending on 'the arts' is spent within walking distance of Macquarie Street. Outer Sydney is home to very few of the iconic state government cultural amenities such as art galleries, concert halls, public libraries or museums. In the outer areas, by and large, local government or the community funds these facilities. The thinking is that the central, government-funded institutions are regional facilities equally available to all. However, if you live 70 or 80 kilometres distant, you mightn't feel quite as enthusiastic about taking the children to visit the museum as you would if it were only five kilometres away.

I don't want to sound negative. In the last 30 years, almost two million people in outer Sydney have been well housed, well served by schools, shopping centres, hospitals and sporting facilities and are now reasonably well served by universities and TAFE colleges. The same observation could be equally applied to the other major cities. There are some remarkable initiatives—theatres and art galleries—built by local government and vigorously supported and patronised by the local community.

The major failures which impact directly on accessibility for those living in the outer suburbs are the failure to develop high-level jobs in these areas and the failure to provide an effective public transport system. A recently reported study identified use by residents of western Sydney of private cars for most of their trips within the western Sydney region and use of public transport to

commute to work in the eastern part of the city. Why did this finding not surprise me?

I am not quite sure what the terms of reference mean by 'eco-efficiency'. I can only assume that it refers to appropriate use of resources and minimal impact on eco-systems. There is considerable recent literature on these issues. Cities tend to have large footprints and are hungry for resources, particularly land. They are also hungry for water, for power and for building materials. There will undoubtedly be many submissions to the inquiry regarding these matters.

Is it possible for a city to survive without drawing in resources from outside itself?

A recently published theory about the ancient Cambodian city of Angkor suggests that its ultimate demise was not due to the city being over-run by invaders, but to an ecological crisis caused by excessive land clearance.

If we are concerned about eco-efficiency, we must address how our cities can become more efficient users of water and power and ask serious questions about our building practices.

The fourth term of reference is "measures to reduce the environmental, social and economic costs of continuing urban expansion".

The critical issue is that there is no silver bullet. Addressing the adverse aspects of our cities and their growth requires consistent long-term commitment to a desirable future. It requires wide and on-going debate in the community and it requires government resources. I hope that this inquiry is the first of many. The issues that will be raised are so important for our community (those who live outside cities as well as those who live in them) that they should be constantly debated at all three levels of government, in academia and throughout the community.

Will our cities continue to expand? Most assume they will although there have been dissenting voices, including those who advocate firm government measures to prevent further expansion. Will their expansion lead to disaster? Not necessarily. Somehow we need to steer a careful line between a laissez-faire approach and an approach built on prescriptive rule-based planning.

We need to work towards an agreed vision of the future—not an easy task. There are many visions of the future. Some are compatible with each other; others are unique. What

can we draw from others' visions if we are prepared to take them seriously and debate them on their merits? It sounds as if I am advocating endless debate. But on-going debate about the country and the cities we want to live in is far better than ad hominem point-scoring and near-horizon vision.

Many measures will be placed before the Environment and Heritage Committee for its consideration. We need to take each of these seriously and be prepared to listen to the proponents' arguments. Hopefully this inquiry will bring many new ideas to light.

The fifth term of reference asks: what are appropriate "mechanisms for the Commonwealth to bring about urban development reform and promote ecologically sustainable patterns of settlement"?

Cynics would say that a good start would be for the federal government to place city issues further up its priority list. It has certainly been said that the must deal with rural and foreign issues but cities are best left to state and local governments. It is probably unfair to regard this as a widely held view at either local, state or Australian Government level.

Many of the most pressing issues that the Commonwealth has to deal with have substantial impact on the way our cities function. Taxation, health and education come immediately to mind.

Sometimes the impacts are subtle and often unnoticed. Why, for example, does a hybrid-powered car with lower fuel consumption and reduced greenhouse gas emissions cost significantly more than the equivalent vehicle powered by a conventional petrol engine?

Why is residential property ownership so favoured in Australia, when it is less important in other countries? Where are the incentives to create new high-level jobs in developing suburbs? What practical assistance can the Commonwealth offer to the development of urban public transport?

The inquiry by the House of Representatives Environment and Heritage Committee is timely. It deserves widespread support and input. I look forward to reading its final report. ■

*John McKerral PSM is a transport engineer with a life-long interest in cities and their planning and management. He was a Steering Committee member, an author and principal editor for the Sustainable Transport in Sustainable Cities project undertaken by the Warren Centre for Advanced Engineering at the University of Sydney between 1999 and 2002.*

*The sustainable cities inquiry by the House of Representatives Environment and Heritage Committee has called for public submissions. For more information on the inquiry visit [www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/environ](http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/environ) or phone (02) 6277 4580 or email [environment.reps@aph.gov.au](mailto:environment.reps@aph.gov.au)*