

House of Representatives

Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage

Inquiry into sustainable cities, 2025

Submission

The Inquiry overview states: “ The purpose of the inquiry is not to set specific actions for particular areas, but to provide a ‘national map’ of issues and approaches.” The following comments are presented in the same vein.

1. Approach to ‘Growth’ issues

The terms of reference and discussion paper cover a broad range of issues useful for analysis of urban policies. Accordingly, they are a welcome aid in opening discussion on planning for the future of Australian cities.

However, neither the terms of reference nor the discussion paper raises a most fundamental issue: Is continuing growth, involving population increases and economic expansion as we currently understand it, to remain an unquestioned option for Australian cities?

Invariably, State governments (with perhaps one notable exception) avoid looking at this issue and proceed by nominating a year in the future, say 2020 or 2030. (Similarly, the Inquiry paper chooses a year – in this case, 2025.) Then, in what could be called ‘the infrastructure first approach to planning’, governments, leading or more probably lead by them, ask their various service authorities to say how that service can be supplied to the specified year. The planning authorities are instructed to find the land to “fit in” a range of projected population numbers.

The political and technical limitations of this approach are obvious. The service and planning arms of government are under direction to accommodate more people, so they must perform. No serious conclusions are drawn as to what might happen after the specified year. Nor is there consideration of what the implications of starting down the track from a higher platform of population might be for future governments.

If the reason for governments proceeding in this constrained way is a feeling that thinking too far ahead is fanciful, it can only mean that governments have not yet cottoned to the necessary time-scales and serious imperatives that are driving today's rigorous environmental assessments.

Every major and many regional cities are constantly reporting being pushed to the edge of water and power supply limits. Encroachment on bio-diverse areas of the continent, including the surrounding seas, by a growing and more affluent population seeking 'nature amenity' is rife. The proliferation of out-of-reach (because of cost or fear of opening a Pandora's box of claims) pollution remedies in specific local air stressed situations belies the complacency that things are going well on the air quality front. There are the de-greened and heat island areas produced where high levels of congestion are occurring or allowed; and there are the un-faced questions about the pollution effects of proliferating aviation tourism on the atmosphere, airport sites and approaches.

The significance of these and other issues should be interrogated under the light of the potential impacts of ongoing growth scenarios. The seven topics in the Discussion Paper could well benefit by being passed through an 'impact of growth assessment sieve'. (The subject of the 'drive for growth' is touched on in more detail below.)

This Committee (or some Federally constituted body), which is at arms length from the relevant State bodies, would seem to be an opportune place to pose the question of the limitations of the current practice within the States that plan for open-ended growth. But the Committee should start by dropping the meaningless '2025' date from its deliberations.

2. Terminology

The terms of reference and discussion paper have used the phrase 'sprawling urban development'.

It is contended that a term such as 'sprawl' will close rather than open up possibilities for discussion, because it is used pejoratively, with ridicule even, in everyday parlance. What is more, using the term in this way can obfuscate the growth pressure element that, together with the continuing

desire by a great many people for a detached house in open settings, are pushing urban expansion.

More neutral terms such as first-, second-, third-, (perhaps) fourth-tier areas to cover say, historic centers and surrounds, early 20th century rings, post WW2 areas to the present, and newly-developing green-field areas are to be preferred.

Characterization of city sectors in this way can help focus attention on the specific issues, freed of bias, of particular areas. For example, in evaluating the ‘needs of Australia within the unique context of the Australian landscape’ (the Paper’s phrase), particular considerations could apply to second- and third-tier areas. Thus, under current ‘compaction’ policies common in most cities, the open landscape of these areas – their remnant indigenous flora whether in public or private lands – is being rapidly reduced. A frank discussion of the desirability of higher density policies, or of alternative policies to attempt to bring the bio-mass of these areas to a level commensurate with that of, say, pre-white, or maybe previous fruit-growing periods, would be aided by the use of more neutral terms. Certainly, terms with pre-judged conclusions should be avoided.

3. Using Case Studies – Unsuitable across-the-board applications

The case studies in the Discussion Paper are informative. There is, of course, a necessary proviso in that solutions in one area may not be appropriate for translation across to another.

In view of the Paper’s attraction to higher density/public transit approaches, it should be emphasized that experience with broad-scale ‘consolidation’ policy outcomes under existing Australian city conditions, environmental, social, administrative, technical and economic, does not inspire confidence. A brief discussion of that experience follows:

The existing metropolitan area extensive layout: Main road infrastructures have, over the years, seen the construction of extensive swathes of roadside housing, shops and offices, and even institutional uses such as schools and children’s facilities. In itself, the location of activities adjoining these roads with their noise, congestion, traffic fumes and particulate pollution is a serious problem requiring urgent attention, including re-design.

However, under the thrust of current ‘consolidation’ policies, over the last decade or so, multiple dwellings, shopping and recreational uses have been added to the previously existing, lower density, urban fabric. The dysfunctional effects are being magnified daily, putting more people, and worryingly, children, at serious health risk. So, a short cut to higher density, seen as desirable because these locations often are near railway stations or adjoin bus routes and tram lines, has merely exacerbated a pre-existing problem.

Professional limitations: The shortage of professional staff, the required sophistication of their assessment skills and the increased work burdens emanating from authorities encouraging growth and redevelopment – these are now commonplace conditions of the planning authority workplace.

An effect of introducing new building and layout, largely higher density, types – requiring a more sophisticated phase of development control - is to magnify the problems of achieving acceptable development. As an example, common amenity conditions for setbacks, planting regimes, building designs, etc., that would avoid or even reduce the deleterious effects for people who might work or reside in unsatisfactory locations, are neglected.

Green building: One of the implementation measures that has taken hold as a result of compaction policies overlain on current stylistic approaches in Australian cities has been a reduction in the size of the subdivision/estate lot for detached housing in the fourth-tier areas. 400-500 sq.m (less than half a quarter acre) lot size is commonplace.

Superimposed on an ethos of ‘affluenza’, the result has been the production of swathes of two-story, high-block coverage housing. The introduction of ‘green’ measures – tree shading, avoidance of air-conditioning, composting facilities, heat island reduction spaces, etc. – has become, and will be in the future, an unlikely option. Designers, builders and house-owners are now trapped into a site envelope that, as hopefully interest in greener building becomes more widespread, will not lend itself to easy upgrading.

Drive for urban growth: Overlaid on the current climate of high investment in property development, spurred on by most Premiers urging/supporting population growth, the influence of ‘compaction’ policies can be seen to be perverse, if perhaps unintended. These policies are basically saying to governments, “you want growth – this is how it can be done: Fit more

people into a smaller space”. The imperatives of environmental stress outlined in the section above on ‘growth’ mean that governments should not be let off the hook by being allowed to believe that Australian cities can go on expanding because planners will always have a trick in their bag to let it happen.

Loss of greenspace: (The comments here have a particular relevance to the Discussion Paper’s objective 1: Preserve bushland, significant heritage and urban green zones).

The entity at stake should not be conceptualized as per this objective. While it has been a commonly used approach, it is not adequate. More rigorously, a term, ‘greenspace’, is being used. It covers all three concepts in this objective, but also all other vegetative matter – especially that surrounding homes, and even that around commercial, industrial and institutional areas.

It is contended that to promote appreciation of a broad concept of the unbuilt landscape, and concern at the elimination or minimalist usage of biomass within close proximity to where people live and work daily, should be the essence of this objective.

This distressing occurrence of continuing loss of greenspace is more prevalent than it might be thought. For example, third tier areas, often thought of as ‘sprawling suburbia’, but more constructively referred to as ‘the middle landscape’, typically contain lot sizes of some 500-600 sq.ms.

Thirty years into its establishment, this landscape is now seeing widespread degradation. The removal of large canopied trees and the loss of native fauna around houses or on large lot areas where reserves and unwanted commercial and institutional uses are pressed into higher density are commonplace.

In summary, if higher density development oriented to public transit provision is to have a place in the construction of Australian cities, then, as a policy, it will need to be carefully crafted to particular, probably very few, suitable locations. We have enough experience now of the poor outcomes which flow from the broad-scale overlay of a general policy of consolidation across metropolitan cities.

A comprehensive study of urban form and energy usage gives a salutary, general warning about the complexity of this issue. “It is one thing to say that cities with different urban forms have different rates of energy consumption; it is quite another to say that a significant improvement can be achieved through realistic changes to the form of a particular city.” (Anderson. Kanaroglou, Miller, “Urban Form, Energy and the Environment: A Review of Issues, Evidence and Policy”, Urban Studies, Vol.33, No.1, 7-335, 1996.)

4. Brief Comments on the Component Objectives

Objective 1: Please refer to the comments on loss of greenspace above.

Objective 2: The working formulation that environmental impact is a function of population size, the activity mix (or the consumption level) and the technology level used in the production of goods and services ($I = PAT$) continues to have relevance. It is important to interrogate energy use in the light of the impacts of growth agendas.

Objective 3: A recent report from Baylor University in the US, that researchers have found traces of an anti-depressant in the entrails of fish in a creek into which treated wastewater flows, is a salutary warning that the technologies of treatment are still in their early days. The treatment was not designed to filter out pharmaceuticals. Clearly, we do not yet know how far the treatment of pharmaceuticals will advance. We should therefore look at issues of the potential for water re-use with caution, as advocated by some local researchers. (See, eg., Gauging the pharmaceutical burden on Sydney’s environment: a preventative response, Journal of Cleaner Production, 2002.)

Objective 4: This is an area where governments can use regulatory measures as educational tools.

Objective 5: Every city needs to look at its own level of transit provision having regard to the costs of alternative infrastructure provision, extent of disturbance, and so on. However, expectations of significant commitment to radically change the balance towards transit may be dashed against the prevailing attitudes of governments to entice or expand vehicle manufacturing establishments in their State. Campaigns for regulatory and other measures to back smaller vehicles, improved fuels, etc., should receive as much airing as the on-going debate about transit versus road provision.

Objective 6: Please refer to comments on green building above.

Objective 7: Please refer to comments in 3 above (Using Case Studies.....)

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