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## Successful cities consult, they don't dictate plans

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*Evidence from abroad shows our city planning approach is all wrong, writes **Jane-Frances Kelly**.*

Big decisions await Australia's cities. How can we grow while maintaining what is most important to us? How will we be able to move around even larger cities without being stuck in congestion? What should we prioritise: more roads or more public transport?

It is sometimes argued that these are the decisions we elect politicians to make for us, but there seems to be a lot of dissatisfaction with the outcomes.

Governments, councils and planning bodies are certainly central to decision making, but [Grattan Institute](#) work emphasises that others - including business and community groups, and, most importantly, residents themselves - can and should play an active part in the choices which shape our cities. If they don't, we are unlikely to be able to make good decisions that will stick.

Meaningful engagement with residents has been a feature of decision making in some of the world's most successful cities. Grattan's report, [Cities: Who Decides](#), examines the decision-making arrangements in cities that are comparable to those in Australia, and which significantly improved the cities across a broad range of areas. Put simply, it asks: in successful cities, who made the decisions and how?

Many of the cities were facing challenges not dissimilar to our own: how to manage the next stage of evolution and growth in a way that would make them better places to live. But the engagement of residents in making the tough trade-offs was an order of magnitude different to anything we have seen in Australia.

Consider how Vancouver developed its [CityPlan](#) in the mid-1990s. First, the scale of public engagement: the city council engaged directly with about 20,000 people, and a survey showed that "about 100,000 people felt they were involved in some way, shape or form".

Second, the depth of engagement: people in Vancouver were presented with "real choices" - along with their consequences. Residents were therefore involved in considering the trade-offs of any decision. The "flavour" of engagement was also important: "it was very much citizens speaking to citizens" - rather than "pontificating by staff or politicians".

The more people engaged, the more they came to accept the need for hard choices, and opted to accommodate more households in existing residential areas, rather than "sending sprawl up the valley".

As one resident commented, "we may be in different boats, but we are in the same sea". Working with developers and builders, residents frequently opted for slightly higher density in return for amenities they valued: "If we had a little more density here, we could have an even larger library" and were willing to add "another floor on this building in return for that".

This sort of engagement is different in scale and in kind from current practice in Australia. One Canadian we spoke to remarked that "if the Vancouver public had been given a plan as finished as the draft *Melbourne 2030*, they would have revolted".

Another, from Portland in the US, contrasted the Portland approach to that in Britain and Australia, where "there seems to be a culture that consultation is about telling people what the planners have decided".

In city after city, it became clear that where hard decisions had been made and then implemented, there was early, genuine, sophisticated and deep public engagement. This doesn't come easily, and it isn't cheap. But the news seems to be that if we want to face our hard decisions in a way that makes our cities better places to live, involving residents is not optional.

Nor does our research give any comfort to those who think that creating a new governance structure for cities will solve our problems.

A common criticism is that there is no level of government responsible for a city. There is an abiding attraction to changing Australia's governance structures - which developed in response to different challenges.

However, the evidence from successful overseas cities does not support the idea that changing governance structures will help. In the successful cities we examined, no one type of governance was dominant. Unnecessary changes to governance structures can also be a distraction from the things that are vital.

In short, changing structures is no cure-all. Nor, for that matter, is resident engagement. But as we try to manage growth - and make effective choices that actually stick - our best bet is to give city-dwellers a real say.

*Jane-Frances Kelly is cities program director at Grattan Institute.*

Jane-Frances Kelly  
Program Director – Cities, Grattan Institute  
Contact: 03 8344 3637 or [jane-frances.kelly@grattan.edu.au](mailto:jane-frances.kelly@grattan.edu.au)

[www.grattan.edu.au](http://www.grattan.edu.au)