

## **Planning policy repairs demand public support**

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The current planning system in NSW satisfies no one. Developers face long delays to get projects approved.

Residents feel they have little power to protect the character of their street or neighbourhood. The only real avenue for residents to have a say is through complaints about decisions that have already been made.

The system needs reform and the Planning Minister, Brad Hazzard, is proposing a fundamental makeover.

Hazzard says he wants to stop individual development applications becoming "site-specific planning wars". Instead, he wants communities to agree in advance on building types, heights and densities for a given area.

Applications that meet those guidelines would then be approved and residents would have little opportunity to object.

He says communities will be given a voice "upfront" in the strategic planning process, but once the framework is set it will be "full steam ahead" for development.

The minister's approach could present an opportunity to broker a new deal on planning that better balances the interests of residents, developers and governments. Ideally it would reduce delays and cut costs to stimulate construction and increase the supply of housing.

However, a planning code that restricts appeal rights needs to be more than a tick-a-box exercise. It must also set standards that improve the quality of what gets built. Achieving a lasting and effective deal on planning will require public engagement on a scale rarely seen in Australia.

A recent attempt at public consultation in NSW shows the extent of the challenge. In early May, as part of drawing up a new metropolitan plan for Sydney, the state government invited online comment on its discussion paper Sydney over the next 20 years.

So far it has received only about 50 responses. It appears most of Sydney's 4.6 million people have no idea their opinion is being sought.

To be meaningful, consultation must present realistic scenarios grounded in local conditions. What will be the costs and benefits of accepting more residents in a particular area? What might the area look like in future? Will government offer support by providing better services, improved public transport or upgraded facilities? What would be the impact of resisting change and maintaining the status quo?

Consultations must also set local concerns in the broader context of the overall shape and future of the city.

In the report *Cities: Who Decides?*, the Grattan Institute examined the experiences of cities such as Seattle and Vancouver that had engaged with residents to develop long-term metropolitan plans and successfully manage change.

In Seattle, each neighbourhood was funded to hire experts to help develop its own values and vision around land-use, design and other issues. During this process, around three-quarters of the city's planning budget was spent on public engagement.

Consultations in Vancouver involved about 20,000 people or about 4 per cent of the population. It resulted in trade-offs and compromise, such as residents opting to accommodate more households in an existing area, rather than send sprawl "up the valley".

Public engagement is not a short cut. It is not cheap or easy or quick. Nor will it produce absolute agreement and put an end to all disputes. Done properly, however, public engagement can build an enduring vision for a city that residents understand and support.

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