

Danger zone: planning the city's future must include consultation

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*Can everyone be a winner in zoning reform? Planning Minister Matthew Guy hopes that "sweeping reforms" to residential zoning will provide certainty to "councils, residents and the development industry". This is an admirable aspiration, but it will be realised only if residents are engaged in working out the detail, writes **Peter Mares***

The minister has outlined a new three-tiered zoning system. The first zone "Neighbourhood Residential" is designed to protect established "low-rise, low-density" areas.

It is touted as the strongest residential protection zone seen in Victoria, with mandatory height controls, strict regulations on subdivision and consideration of minimum lot sizes.

Residents who fear development in quiet suburban streets will welcome this strict approach, but there could be unforeseen consequences.

For example, will it be possible to build a granny flat in a backyard to accommodate a parent or an adult child? What about people who wish to downsize but remain living in the same area? If zoning only allows for free-standing houses on large blocks, empty-nesters or people who have recently lost a partner or separated may have little choice but to move away. The area will also be closed to potential new residents who cannot afford to live in a detached house.

The other two zones – "General Residential" and "Residential Growth" – are intended to "support development of medium and higher density housing in appropriate locations". There is an interesting choice of language here. The term "neighbourhood" is used to distinguish between "low-rise, low-density" residential areas and "growth nodes". The underlying assumption appears to be that increased density is inimical to a sense of neighbourhood. In fact, the term "density" tends to conjure up images of people stacked high in anonymous boxes.

Contemporary Melbourne suggests a more complex reality. The most closely settled suburb, South Yarra, is also one of the more desirable, with a strong sense of local character and high levels of social interaction. One of its attractions is a diverse mix of housing types.

The minister says that zoning for "neighbourhoods" is intended to "protect what makes Melbourne great – our streetscapes, our amenity, our liveability – while encouraging density and growth in clearly defined areas". Again, the wording appears to suggest that, in any given area, population increase inevitably reduces quality of life.

The attractiveness of a residential area, however, is not a simple function of the number of dwellings per hectare or the size of backyards. It arises from a range of factors, including landscaping, walkability, design, access to public transport and proximity to schools, shops, cafes, parks, swimming pools, libraries and so on.

Identifying new categories of zones is one thing – establishing the boundaries will be quite another. We know that it is not enough to designate the area around a train station as the preferred location for development. This has been tried in the past with limited success and zoning was not the barrier to be overcome.

The minister says zone boundaries will be at the discretion of local councils and that ultimately "the view of that community will inform which zone best fits where".

How does this sit with the process already under way to develop a new strategic plan for Melbourne? Will debate about zoning reform be part of this process or sit outside it?

The minister kicked off the strategic planning process two months ago by urging "everyone to give their ideas". Yet I would not mind betting that few Melburnians are aware that their opinion is being sought.

If the government is serious about giving residents a say, then it needs to engage the public in a manner never before seen in Australia.

In its report *Cities: Who Decides?*, the Grattan Institute examines the record of comparable cities in North America and Europe that have succeeded in making difficult planning decisions without alienating residents. The evidence shows that a sophisticated approach is called for – one that is driven by residents arguing through the issues with a clear sense of possible options but no predetermined outcome.

The public conversation needs to be concrete and specific. Residents need to know whether population increases in particular areas will be supported with increased resources such as extra childcare places or more frequent public transport services.

Melbourne's population is expected to grow by 50 per cent during the next two to three decades – from about 4 million to 6 million. Clearly, our city cannot wow at this rate and stay the same, but change can be welcome. Many people would argue that Melbourne is a better place to live today than it was in the 1960s with half as many residents.

We all have a stake in helping to shape the future. The Planning Minister has promised to release key features of the zoning reforms on Monday. Perhaps this will be the catalyst for the robust discussion we need to have.

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