City harmony: just ask the people
Published in the Australian Financial Review, page 63, Tuesday 3 April 2012

Giving people a real say in planning is the best way to manage urban growth, writes Peter Mares

It will come as no surprise to the average city dweller to learn that the Council of Australian Governments Reform Council has concluded that none of Australia’s capital cities has a fully integrated strategic planning system.

The flaws in our capital city planning system are obvious to all, whether it’s drivers stuck in traffic, residents of new housing estates with no public transport, council officers in urban growth corridors struggling to provide services to booming populations or developers trying to build medium-density housing in established suburbs.

Integrating land use management, transport planning, infrastructure development, job creation, environmental protection, housing policy and service delivery across different departments and different levels of government will never be easy. The COAG Reform Council report, released yesterday, provides some useful pointers for improving on current practice.

First, it suggests that governments and business must grasp the nettle of community engagement. This might sound like a recipe for development gridlock as important projects are stalled by lengthy and costly public consultations.

At first glance, “streamlined” decision making that steamrolls over resident objections under the rhetoric of national or state priorities might appear to be a more attractive and more efficient option. However, history suggests that in a liberal democracy such as Australia, the short-term gain of ignoring public attitudes is outweighed by the long-term pain of entrenched antagonism towards any kind of change.

In our report Cities: Who Decides? the Grattan Institute investigated the decision-making processes used in eight successful cities in North America and Europe.

We found that effective public engagement in decision making was a shared characteristic of cities that had managed to make tough choices about future directions, choices not unlike those confronting Australian cities today.

Resident engagement in that process was an order of magnitude different from anything seen in Australia. For example, when Vancouver developed its CityPlan in the mid-1990s, city authorities engaged directly with about 20,000 people, and a survey showed that about 100,000 people felt they were involved in some form.

The flavour of engagement is important: it needs to be a true dialogue between citizens rather than a superficial attempt by politicians, planners or developers to convince residents of the wisdom of
decisions already taken. A successful process of public consultation needs to begin early, before
decisions are made, and it needs to offer people real choices with real consequences.

In Vancouver, for example, this meant that communities opted to accommodate more households in
existing residential areas, rather than see sprawl spread into surrounding valleys. Residents opted for
slightly higher density in return for improved amenities, such as better parks, libraries or transport
links.

Community engagement can also help long-term plans survive the short-term exigencies of politics.
The COAG Reform Council says governments need to focus more on implementing plans and getting
results in cities, with clear frameworks for monitoring and measuring progress. This is in line with
Grattan’s findings that successful cities demonstrate a consistent strategic direction across electoral
cycles.

A 30-year plan for a capital city is less likely to be derailed by a change of government if voters have
been engaged from the start in helping to develop the vision that it entails.

Voters are also more likely to support the ongoing disruption of change if there is a transparent
process for measuring progress against agreed benchmarks.

Residents will often react to development proposals with intense concerns about the impact of a
particular proposal on their local area. But Australians are also capable of understanding the shared
benefits that can accrue from development, such as when infrastructure is upgraded or the housing
supply is increased.

Urban development involves trade-offs. We need to have more faith in the capacity of Australians to
help determine what those trade-offs should be. Meaningful public engagement is not quick, cheap or
easy but nor is the alternative, particularly when it results in drawn-out court battles.

Our current approach to planning satisfies no one.

Peter Mares is Cities Program Fellow at Grattan Institute.

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