

Vision splendid for Sydney needs community input

Published in [The Sydney Morning Herald](#), page 22, Wednesday 17 April 2013

The O'Farrell government's moves to recast planning in NSW are bold but considered. If the proposals in its white paper are implemented successfully, they will change the shape of Sydney for the better.

It has long been clear that planning in NSW needs a fundamental overhaul.

The hallmark of the current system is complexity. It is focused almost entirely on the appraisal of individual projects with little consideration for long-term strategic planning and the future shape of the city and its suburbs. Developers, builders and home renovators are frustrated by delays and uncertainties. Residents only get to engage with the future of their neighbourhoods in a negative, reactive manner – as objectors to unwanted change. Many have lost confidence in the approvals process and believe it is tainted by money and influence.

The failure of planning has significant negative consequences. Housing costs are inflated by restricted supply. Inadequate housing choice means the market is poorly matched to people's preferences. There is a pervasive sense that Sydney's growth is arbitrary and random and that the future of the city is not anchored to a coherent strategy.

The white paper aims to change that with a new planning system that is simpler. The aim is that 80 per cent of development proposals will be "complying" or "code assessable" within five years.

We should be absolutely clear about what this means: in four out of five cases residents will be "notified for information" about a development application but will not be invited to express a view on it, object or seek modifications. Projects that comply with established rules and standards will be approved within 25 days (or 10 days if they are "straightforward").

This might sound like a field day for developers at the expense of local interests but it is not. At the heart of the white paper is a bargain – in return for giving up objection rights and enabling swifter approvals, residents get an opportunity to help write the rules for development within their local area over the next decade. This will include rules on details that often cause neighbourhood disputes, such as overlooking and overshadowing. Once that process is complete, residents receive a firm guarantee that they will be protected from inappropriate projects: proposals that fall outside the agreed boundaries of acceptable development will be rejected outright. If projects push those boundaries, or have substantial social, economic or environmental impacts, then the community will get a say. Local councils or council-appointed expert panels will review those projects on their merits.

It is an ambitious idea and a radical break from the past. Instead of plans being imposed from above, the community, business and government will engage in an informed dialogue to develop a shared view of acceptable development. The aim is to draft interlocking strategic plans for the city as a whole that fit together, one inside the other.

The emphasis will be on collective problem solving rather than on conflict. Design and mapping software will enable residents to visualise the ways their suburbs might change, and equip them to negotiate with government and developers. Residents might get a guarantee of better quality open space in return for accepting more houses in their area.

Critics will dismiss this as offering a fairy tale vision. Certainly it won't put an end to disagreements on planning matters, but it could create a mechanism for resolving differences.

The new NSW approach is modelled on examples of community engagement in cities such as Vancouver; Seattle and Portland. These plans, and the process of dialogue and engagement that

underpin them, provide a framework for negotiating the trade-offs that are an inevitable part of living together in a growing city.

The white paper will not be easy to implement. The NSW government has set itself a monumental challenge. It is proposing a process of community engagement on a scale not yet seen in Australia.

There is a great deal of learning to be done. Recent public consultations for the draft metropolitan strategy managed to draw only 240 people to "drop in" discussion sessions across the city. The accompanying online "debate" generated just 56 comments.

This is a long way short of meaningfully involving Sydneysiders. A strategy of local engagement to set development rules needs to be far more sophisticated, thorough and extensive than anything ever attempted before in Australia. It will take a significant investment of time and money and will only succeed if a substantial and representative share of Sydney residents joins in the process.

A policy based on evidence is welcome. But implementing it will be a much tougher task.

Jane-Frances Kelly is Cities Program Director at Grattan Institute.

Grattan's reports are available www.grattan.edu.au