

SOS Forum 19 August 2006  
Presentation by Dr Tony Recsei - Summary

We live in a wonderful country. We have sun, we have sea and we have space. To many, we are the envy of the world. The benefits that we enjoy are the hardwon result of the creative endeavours of our forebears, something of inestimable value that we cannot just allow to be destroyed. But there are forces doing their utmost to devastate our unique Australian way of life who want us to live packed together on top of one another like chooks in battery cages.

Planning Department Officials say: "I think its really the way to go. ...Meet up for coffee underneath. It's a totally new style of how we live". Some people may wish to spend their time this way. However others may have different ideas of how they want to live. We should not all be forced into this latte existence by the bureacrats in the Planning Deparment. After all, the officials are paid by us to do what we require and not to dictate to us how we should live.

The government tries to tell us that high-density is for the overall community benefit. It says we must all have "our share" of high density. It claims that if we live like this transport will be improved, we will save money and save the environment.

I am here to tell you that the benefits they claim do not happen and that the consequences of their misguided policies are only now becoming evident. Higher densities do not improve the urban situation. In the journal *People and Place* I pointed out that no one can indicate a successful example of a high-density policy. Ex Sydney sustainability commissioner Professor Peter Newman responded to this article, naming two examples - Subi-Centro in Perth and Vancouver in Canada. In the following edition of the journal I replied proving that in both these places public transport usage is *declining relatively* and not increasing as he maintained. I also showed that what he calls his famous graph is in fact an artifact. His graph purports to depict that high-density is the main factor relating to fuel consumption. Actually density is a minor factor affecting fuel consumption, the price of petrol is much more significant. I have not heard further from Peter Newman on this issue.

To try to justify their unpopular policies the Planning Department has been promulgating fallacies

The first fallacy relates to transport. Public transport plays an important role in Sydney's transport mix. However it cannot be used as on excuse to impose high density on us. The high-density planners urge that the planning of Australian cities emulate that of European cities, such as Paris, Copenhagen, Stockholm and Vienna. Then we will abandon our cars, they say and use public transport.

But this is not what is happennng. Firstly we can see the proportion of public transport journeys in denser European cities is not materially different from that of Sydney. Secondly, if we look at the trends in public transport use – they are nearly all down. During this period public transport use in Hamburg was down 26% in a decade, Copenhagen down 12%.

At one time Sydney was much smaller than it is today and most of Sydney's employment was in the CBD. Public transport is very suitable for travel to a central location. As Sydney got bigger and busier employment became decentralised to low-density suburbs and only

13% of employment is now in the CBD. The same trend has been evident in other large world cities. Unfortunately it is just not practical to run public transport from everywhere to everywhere.

I bought a house near a railway station and tried to use public transport and my bicycle whenever possible. But this is becoming more and more difficult. I was knocked off my bike by a truck and the neurologist I subsequently saw said "Don't do it again". And with public transport in Sydney, in spite of more than a decade of urban densification, public transport percentage share is significantly down. The number of services is decreasing and the trains are slower than they were in the 1940s. Passengers are subjected to annoying and even alarming operational practices including being sealed in the new carriages. Their fate in the event of an emergency remains at the whim of City Rail staff.

A recent Herald/Nielssen poll reveals the current situation. Even if the service were to be improved, 60% of people in NSW would not travel more on public transport.

To get public transport to be used for most of peoples' journeys extremely high densities are needed. Hong Kong's density of 50,000 people per square km is the highest in the world. Travelling by car there is not an option for most people due to traffic congestion and absence of parking space. Public transport usage is high, comprising 80% of journeys. Hong Kong is the world's only successful example of a public transport city.

To attain Hong Kong density, Sydney's density would have to be increased 25 times so that all of Sydney would be jam-packed into an area of radius 5 km around Central Station. Do we really have to live like this? One must ask why?

Average journey time to work increases in dense cities, not the other way around. Sydney travel times now are worse than those in Los Angeles. This is not surprising – In addition to fast deteriorating public transport Sydney has a shocking road system. Just look at our freeway capacity compared to other cities. Way below that of Hong Kong, Singapore, Barcelona, Athens, Paris, Toronto, Milan and Tokyo. High-density is not the way to go.

New technology is likely to provide much better transport solutions than forcing high-density policies onto unwilling communities in the hope of reintroducing yesteryear transport systems. Natural gas driven vehicles are ready for manufacture. They can be refilled from the house gas supply using a multistage compressor. Australia has enough natural gas to fuel transport for a hundred years. All we need to do is to modify vehicles and replicate the liquid petroleum distribution system with one for natural gas. Great strides are being made with electrically powered vehicles. Both these types emit less CO2 per person than does public transport. Looking further into the future other fuels present possibilities – even iron when in nanoparticle form. Necessity is the mother of invention.

A great city evolves as a result of the large diversified pool of labour, jobs and facilities it provides. It develops multiple attractors such as distinctive work opportunities, specialist supplies, schools of choice, universities, unique sports, entertainment and friends to visit. These have moved from central to diverse locations to which public transport is no longer feasible. I know that there are well-meaning public spirited people who genuinely believe public transport. But the reality is that except in extreme situations only a small fraction of transport will be in that mode.

Contrary to what we are told by the Planning Department, the higher densities being proposed in the Metropolitan Strategy will increase and not reduce traffic congestion.

We need to remember that transport routes are the arteries of a city. Block them up and the economic effects could be catastrophic.

The next fallacy relates to cost.

They tell us that high density is good for the economy and that it will save on infrastructure cost. But it is becoming apparent that high density retrofitted into existing suburbs *overloads* infrastructure and merely postpones expenditure. The auditor-general tells us that Sydney's roads are the worst of any city in Australia and are at risk of becoming unsafe. Increased traffic necessitates costly road maintenance. Power supplies are failing more and more frequently, leaving people in the dark and have to be upgraded. Upgrading old systems by digging up roads, avoiding pipes and interfacing with outdated technology must cost a lot of money. We are overcharged for the services so we do not notice the upgrade cost.

Failures are increasingly evident in sewer systems. In Willoughby something urgent had to be done to prevent overflows. The authorities kept very quiet about the \$10 million plus sewer that had to be installed in Chatswood using highly specialised directional drilling techniques.

The \$10 million sewer did not solve the problem. These children are walking past toilet paper and worse. Chatswood has been plagued with dozens of sewage spills in the last six months. This is the result of retrofitting high density onto suburbs designed for lower densities. Those responsible should have their noses rubbed in it.

The infrastructure of our suburbs was designed for the density of dwellings then built. Add more people and you must overload the sewers, overload our roads, overload the electricity and water supply.

In a study of 700 United States cities, council sewer and water service charges are highest in the high density core of cities and lowest in lower density rings around the city. So, the evidence is that high density does not reduce public sector costs.

There is of course another side to cost – the cost of land that Wendell Cox has told you about. As a result of land strangulation the cost of industrial land in Sydney is about twice that in other Australian cities.

How are our industries going to be able to compete on world markets? Our industries have to pay additional wages because people are lumbered with disproportionate rents or mortgages. And they have to pay excessive factory rentals. I suggest that the long-term consequences are already being felt. The economy of NSW, after more than a decade of urban densification is suffering. New South Wales now has the worst performing economy in Australia with the highest unemployment rate and the highest taxes.

High density is not good for the environment. What is the first thing that happens when high-density is built? They cut down the trees. With high-density there is more noise, more heat, more hard surfaces. Rain has nowhere to go except to rush down the streets carrying pollution into our waterways. High-density advocates tell us high-rise saves energy. The facts are otherwise. High-rise uses much more energy per person than

single-residential. Think of lifts, clothes driers, common lighted areas. And somewhat surprisingly and contrary to what they tell us, there is no saving in water consumption by people in high rise.

High-rise is bad for our health. In decades past high-rise developments were also called suicide towers. A study of over 4 million Swedes has shown why. The researchers found that the rates for psychosis were 70% greater for the denser areas and there was a 16% greater risk of developing depression.

In confirmation, Professor Cummings in his comprehensive Australian Unity Well-being Index, reports that the happiest electorates tend to have a lower population density.

So I challenge anyone to show me that high-density is good for the environment.

Another myth is that urban densification provides increased housing choice.

To own their own free-standing home has been a major goal of most families, notably those of low income.

Families with children are finding housing choice increasingly limited. Data from the Census shows that, in the inner suburban ring of Sydney where density is highest, the proportion of homes with children is much reduced.

I don't think there is much doubt regarding what the public wants. They want choice and survey after survey reveals they mostly prefer single-residential housing. For example, a study of social trends during the past two decades shows that 83% of Australians prefer to live in a free standing home. Surveys also demonstrate that there is no shortage of multi-unit housing.

The suggestion that densification allows greater housing choice is just not true.

A further example of how we have been thoroughly brainwashed is the notion that Australia is short of land.

In fact we are told that Australia is so short of land that as the population increases the area of Sydney should not be increased. This is just ridiculous. Firstly Sydney's ecological footprint, the area to supply the energy and materials needed and to absorb wastes is 150 times greater than the actual city area. This ecological footprint depends on the number of people and does not decrease if the city gets denser. Secondly the actual urbanised areas of Australia occupy less than 0.3% of the land area. What is more, there is no shortage of farmland. Ask farmers about the prices they get for their produce. Thirdly if the Department of Planning manages to double Sydney's residential density (which is a situation horrific to most people), Sydney's 45 km cross-section would only be reduced by some 5 km. Negligible. The pain would not be worth the gain. Meanwhile much valued urban bushland within the city is being decimated. It is amazing that we can be conned into believing such politically correct "too short of land" nonsense.

I have asked Professor Peter Newman, Professor Ed Blakely and Chris Johnson how many car journeys the proposed Sydney Metrostrategy high-density centres will save? They don't know. How many additional jobs will the projected urban centres provide that are not already in current municipal centres? They cannot tell me. Where we can find a

successful example of a centres policy? No answer. One wonders how they can have the gall to impose a policy onto us when they can make no prediction about the benefits they claim will result.

And they all keep very quiet about a major effort at implementing a centres policy. In the 1950s the Markelius plan for Stockholm established high-density residential and employment centres around transport nodes like beads on a string. Sadly, in a geographically ideal area for such a scheme, it was a failure. The jobs did not materialise and the residents in the medium- and high-rise rental apartments moved out. They have been replaced by migrants and social welfare recipients.

So when one analyses the reasons given for the high-density they are forcing onto us we find they are spurious. The benefits they claim for high-density are just not borne out.

The mechanism used to implement high density is Machiavellian. The Department of Planning has set targets for the various regions of Sydney. It demands that every Council submit to it a residential strategy that will provide an increase in density. There will not be much left for life as it is now. Apply this to your area and think what it will look like.

If the Department of Planning accepts a residential strategy from a council to provide this sort of increase then the council can retain its planning powers, otherwise the Department takes planning powers away from the council.

We live in an unpredictable and increasingly dangerous world. Risks from human actions or natural phenomena can unexpectedly and rapidly spring up. It seems extremely bad planning from a risk management point of view to cram the bulk of the NSW population and economic activity into a tiny area. Vulnerability to all sorts of disasters, both natural and man-made is vastly increased. Some dispersion of our people and our assets is a much safer strategy.

There are better alternatives to housing an increasing population than forcing high-density onto Sydney.

Balanced development can be accomplished by a combination of decentralisation strategies. To cater for a portion of additional population, new satellite cities could be developed sufficiently close to the capital cities to be able to utilise facilities that would not be viable if developed locally. The satellites would be far enough away to inhibit less important travel. These satellite cities should incorporate desired features such as optimal transport facilities and environmental sustainability that we cannot successfully retrofit into existing suburbs.

Additionally there should also be a policy of repopulating declining regions. In this regard, lessons could be learnt from the previous decentralisation attempt which had many flaws and ended after a change of government.

The Commonwealth Government must take some responsibility for new arrivals that result from its immigration policies. It should provide funds to cater for the necessary infrastructure and employment required to promote acceptable decentralised development across the nation. It should also provide workable incentives such as income tax concessions for those who set up a business or work in these areas.

We have to beat the high density brigade. We have to show the politicians they must listen to ordinary Australians. Our parliamentary representatives must not be hostage to vested

interests or to dogmatic ideologs. We have to show them that unless they listen to us they will feel pain at the ballot box. In a democracy, that is up to us.