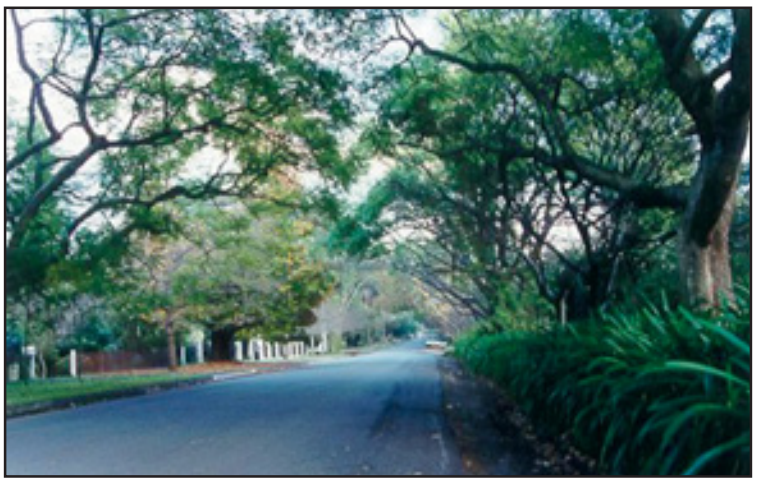
Urban consolidation myths

SOS President Dr Tony Recsei considers that the NSW Government policies on 'urban consolidation' can best be described as a fad. In this shortened version of his talk to the National Trust 'Suburbia' Conference, 25 February 2002, he sets out the myths behind the government's unpopular "urban consolidation" policy.



Visitors to Sydney from large centres overseas have commented on the beauty and relative spaciousness of the city. Should we be reducing this spaciousness by increasing population density with "urban consolidation"?

Higher densities make substantial changes to the environment in which we live and the way we live – we must not create future 'consolidated' urban slums.

During past centuries, societies have struggled to escape the appalling consequences of over-crowding.

PlanningNSW has produced high-density regulations, the Minister has signed them, and these regulations have been applied despite the fact that they have never been debated in the Parliament. SOS insists that these important planning instruments must have full parliamentary and public scrutiny.

Typically the high-density structures replace single-residential dwellings in single-residential areas against the wishes of the local community.

The Minister for Planning and his Department say society will benefit from high-density policies in six ways:

- Improved traffic conditions
- Saving of farmland and bushland
- Less pollution
- More choice
- Saving of cost
- Improved community networks.

There are good reasons for saying that all of these are more myth than reality.

Myth No. 1: Improved traffic

PlanningNSW would have us believe that 'urban consolidation' improves traffic and air quality and reduces greenhouse gas emissions. Most people, however, are under the impression that as density increases so does traffic congestion. And they're right!

Research both here and overseas shows increasing congestion results from a higher density of people. Nowhere in the world can one find a developed high-density city with free-flowing traffic and good air quality. The higher the density, the greater the congestion, even if the cities have well developed public transport.

Increasing traffic

PlanningNSW claims that 'urban consolidation' in Sydney has saved 320 million km travelled per year, resulting in air quality improvements. However, any saving is completely over-shadowed by additional energy usage caused by congestion (additional vehicle stops and starts and idling). In addition, demolition and construction consume considerable energy. Further, draining, ventilation and lighting of basement-parking areas and the use of lifts, clothes dryers and air-conditioning associated with unit living mean that 'urban consolidation' causes ongoing high energy consumption.

Large European cities like Paris experience severe congestion; in many, the average vehicle speed is only 20 km per hour. This is so even if they have high density living, no freeways and intensive rail transit systems. In reality, more than 90% of private travel in these cities is in cars, and increasingly so. And in Sydney, in spite of the high-density policies imposed over the last 10 years, traffic continues to get worse. Car use keeps on increasing over other forms of transport.

The unfortunate reality is that with increasing densities, expanded use of public transport is at best minimal. So much for the myth of improved air quality! The increased traffic congestion produces more pollution than any saving. The higher the density, the worse the air we breathe.

Myth No. 2: Bushland and farmland saved

Dr Refshauge has repeatedly said that a 'consolidated' city saves farmland and bushland. 'Urban consolidation' in Sydney, in the last 10 years has, he says, saved 8500 hectares of farmland and bushland. Sounds impressive. But it's only around 700 metres on Sydney's 40 km diameter. In the same period, 1.5 million hectares of bush was cleared on NSW farmlands.

The Minister fails to mention the pockets of remnant bushland that have been lost within Sydney suburbs as a result of his "urban consolidation" policy.

Bushland awaiting the developer

Myth No. 3: Less pollution

Higher population densities certainly do not improve pollution within the city. Air pollution increases with increased traffic. So does noise. And trees, which remove pollutants from the air, are removed to make way for unit blocks. Salinity problems are beginning to emerge in some western suburbs, following tree removal.

Further, increased densities bring more polluted stormwater and more discharges into urban creeks and waterways. In short, significant degradation.

Myth No. 4: Greater housing choice

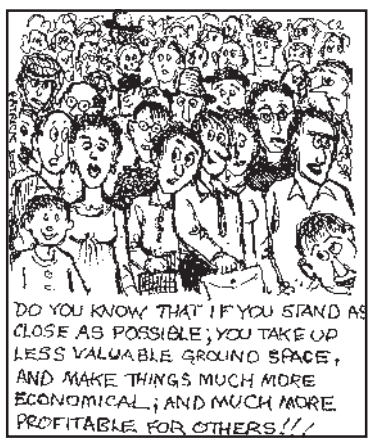
Some folk like to live in high-density surroundings, especially during certain times of their lives. The housing market caters for this diversity. There is no need for the State Government to interfere. However, PlanningNSW is forcing uniformly higher densities onto every municipality. This reduces diversity as every area is made to look the same. There is evidence that we are experiencing a surplus of units and an increasing shortage of affordable homes suitable for families.

With 'urban consolidation', heritage must disappear. Where will Sydney's present attractiveness be then? Replaced by a series of grey suburbs, with canyons of high-rise flats and shoulder-to-shoulder townhouses and terraces? Heritage gone? Diversity gone? Greenery gone? Gardens gone? Wildlife gone?

Myth No. 5: Cost savings

The Government says it will save money by the more efficient use of infrastructure if it pushes more people into existing suburbs. However, higher densities simply overload existing infrastructure and downgrade our quality of life.

The NSW Government is not saving cost with 'urban consolidation' – it is merely evading and postponing essential expenditure. If our quality of life is not to plummet, the bill will ultimately have to be paid.



Myth No. 6: Improved social networks

And, finally, a new myth. At a recent Planning conference the Minister for Planning implied that high density enhances the involvement of people in community activities and as a result improves mental health and life expectancy.

However, the information in the reference to which he referred clearly showed the opposite; it showed that people's community involvement in large cities is less than in small towns. Also, in cities community involvement is less in the centre and more in the suburbs. So where density is more, community involvement is less.

In addition, as community involvement declines, antisocial behaviour increases. Since the 1970s Sydney residents' groups have been commenting on increased mental health problems and suicide rates associated with high-rise living – with what they call "suicide towers".

Urban consolidation an unpopular fad

The NSW Government imposes 'urban consolidation" policies despite all the available evidence, which shows such 'consolidation' to be detrimental. "Urban Consolidation" is nothing more than a fad propped up by myths. It is a fad detested by the community.

Snap surveys performed by Save Our Suburbs in the Parramatta and Central Coast areas show that the issue that most worries people is creeping overdevelopment. Other areas of concern voiced are caused by overdevelopment: infrastructure not coping, traffic congestion, rising crime rates and overcrowded hospitals – apart from general diminishing of quality-of-life.