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Time to end the big squeeze

Urban consolidation is taking too high a toll on the beauty and amenity of Sydney's suburbs, writes Tony Recsei

Visitors to the Olympics have commented on the beauty and relative spaciousness of Sydney, the very attributes being destroyed by urban consolidation. Attractive houses and charming gardens are being replaced with home units, while formerly quiet streets become choked with traffic.

And while many local councillors have been voted out for allowing excessive medium-density and high-density development, it is the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning and State politicians who are really responsible.

The department has been selling urban consolidation to State governments for 20 years while allowing councils and the Land and Environment Court to bear the brunt of community anger. Yet the hands of the court and the councils are tied by department policies.

The department claimed in a *Herald* article in January that 'global research' indicates the "compact city" is more sustainable, though the research supporting that notion is not spelt out.

It says that squeezing people together saves "valuable farmland and bushland"; that Sydney would have lost 8,500 hectares of bush, farmland and market gardens (apparently in the last decade or so) without high-density housing.

It does not indicate that 8,500 hectares would extend Sydney's 60-kilometre diameter by a mere 900 metres at the perimeter.

And the department also fails to consider that the urban bushland its policies are destroying is not

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merely attractive, but counteracts pollution, mitigates rainwater run-off, cools the city and is a

sanctuary for wildlife. Urban bushland and suburban trees and gardens are more valuable than 900 metres of fringe farmland and market gardens.

Urban consolidation is also said to cut traffic and, consequently, air pollution. But the small increase in public transport use is more than outweighed by the increased number of people in any one area who still use their cars. This is borne out by a number of studies here and abroad, including one by Brunton and Brindle last year in Melbourne.

The department holds that medium- and high density living brings savings in infrastructure such as water supply, sewers and roads. But creating new infrastructure in new areas is cheaper than upgrading existing infrastructure, with all its obstructions, legal constraints and problems of obsolete engineering.

In most municipalities, these services are already overloaded. They often fail, and the community . (that's you and me) ends up paying for the upgrading through increased rates.

New developments can effectively integrate energy-saving techniques, water re-use, underground power and communication cables and other measures because they are all done at the same time. Technical advances, such as the Internet and very fast transport, can further enhance the viability of new developments.

Another adverse effect of urban consolidation is the cost of the developments that replace the viable housing that is torn down. Villa housing is some 50 percent more costly to build than detached housing and two-storey townhouses twice as costly, according to the *Urban FuturesJournal* because of the more expensive construction techniques used and a range of other factors.

High-density units - such as those being built under SEPP 5, supposedly for aged or disabled persons - can be very expensive (for example, I noted some recently in Rosedale Road, Gordon, costing more than \$500000 for a unit).

But there is usually no economic advantage to residents in shifting from single dwellings into equivalent multi-unit construction. My own inquiries indicate that the cost of additional help to cope with the gardening, maintenance and household chores associated with a single residence is usually eclipsed by the levies charged in medium-density developments. As well, those in units and

townhouses have to put up with the idiosyncrasies of the other residents.

Anyway, most of these SEPP 5 medium-density development are not really for the aged or infirm which may well be an indication that such developments are not needed. Surveys by the Planning Research Centre at the University of Sydney indicate that there is no particular shortage of multi-unit accommodation.

Those who have worked a good part of their life to purchase and adapt a home in an area of lower densities can be severely affected by the sudden appearance of multiple units next door. There is a huge reduction in privacy by being overlooked and because of the removal of screening vegetation. Then there are the effects of noise, overshadowing, traffic and parking problems and loss of property value.

Why does the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, through the Land and Environment Court, force medium-density developments into areas designed for single-density? It is noteworthy that three of the department's six-member "residential strategy advisory committee" are developers, two are bureaucrats and one represents local government.

With the best of intentions, how can such a body provide representative and objective to the minister? Developers' primary goals are short term commercial gains while local government has an ongoing responsibility to act for the long-term benefit of communities.

Modern retail centres require large catchment areas of people to maximise their profits and high-density developments provide them.

The self-styled NSW Urban Task Force, an association of commercial interests, has as its declared aim to "slow the momentum of a community-led anti-development push in the suburbs", according to a Herald article in April. Each member of this body pays \$75,000 to join a \$5,000 annual fee. Isolated community groups, fighting to save a community asset, have no chance against such financial heavyweights. But that could change if all community groups and residents acted together.

Save Our Sydney Suburbs inc was formed by residents to provide a focus for attempts to protect our suburbs from excessive development and higher-density rezoning.

It is a grassroots organisation with hundreds of supporters in dozens of community organisations across Sydney and in regional NSW.

The damage to the environment, heritage and character of our suburbs has to be curtailed. The effects may be slow but they are irreversible. The department must be pressured to plan properly, rather than surreptitiously forcing us to huddle closer together.

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