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Dictatorship of the* high-density bullies

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Bureaucratic dictates
threaten to turn beautiful
Sydney into a city of
shades of grey.

AUSTRALIANS returning after an overseas trip are often heard to express relief to be back in surroundings that are less congested. They remark that they had thought Sydney was crowded, but after having experienced London, Manhattan, Hong Kong or Bangkok, they are **very** happy to be home.

No wonder there was a backlash in the local government elections against the State Government imposing unsympathetic medium- and high-density development on our Sydney suburbs.

This policy is supposed to deal with the increasing population resulting from immigration. However, the newly elected councillors can do little. Using just two planning regulations, the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning (DUAP) and the Land and Environment Court are effectively forcing local communities to accept DUAP's dictates, irrespective of the desires and aspirations of local communities. Bureaucracy, not democracy, rules.

There appears to have been a woeful absence of true planning in DUAP. Truthful planning should be based on valid research the scanning of alternatives and evaluating the outcomes of the course to be adopted. DUAP does not cite such research to justify its position. Instead it dangles five enticing myths before us, myths which lure our attention away from the real consequences of high-density living.

Myth No 1: Traffic congestion: DUAP maintains that increasing urban density will decrease traffic congestion because more people will use public transport. However, research shows that people will choose to use a car if they can afford it, and people living in the expensive high-density units being built can certainly afford cars.

I have asked DUAP to advise where one can find a high-density city that does not experience chrome traffic congestion DUAP does not answer. There is no such place. From Paris (an old high-density city with an excellent rail transit system and no freeways) to Portland in the United States (a new high-density

experiment) there exists extreme and ever worsening levels of traffic congestion. Higher density results in aggravated congestion.

Myth No 2: Cost: DUAP maintains that costs will be saved if high-density living is imposed instead of allowing people to live in conventional residential blocks. However, it is becoming apparent that the new high-density units being constructed are very expensive (up to \$800,000 for a unit). For a variety of reasons, including construction techniques associated with multi-storey construction and the effects of different forms of labour organisation, the construction cost of villa housing is some 50 per cent more expensive than normal housing. Two-storey townhouses cost twice that of normal detached housing. Also, the augmentation of already overloaded water supplies, stormwater drains and sewers, in busy streets is very expensive.

Myth No 3: Farmland and bushland: DUAP always uses the emotive term "urban sprawl" instead of the more accurate and objective "urban spread". DUAP maintains that squashing people closer together saves valuable farmland and bushland". If we separate emotion from fact and actually calculate how much farmland and bushland high-density living would save, we see that any saving of Australia's vast expanses of farmland and bushland is quite negligible.

If people were concentrated together by an extra 15% I Sydney's residential areas (115 people living where 100 live now) only 1.6 kilometres would be shaved off the current 60-kilometre spread across Sydney. However, 15 per cent more people in each hectare would have major deleterious effects on urban neighbourhoods - congestion escalates with increasing densities. Even if, in some horrendous bureaucratic scenario, one doubled the number of people each hectare, only six kilometres would be pared off the current 60 kilometres, negligible when compared with existing farm and bushland.

Myth No 4: Pollution: using the fiction that there will be less traffic, DUAP maintains that high-density living results in less pollution. Analysis of Myth No 1 shows that traffic congestion will increase, not decrease. There will be increased atmospheric, noise and urban

pollution. There will be more hard surfaces, less tree cover, more use of air-conditioners and more polluted stormwater running into creeks.

Myth No 5: Housing Choice: DUAP bizarrely says urban consolidation will "increase housing choice". It says that areas must be transformed until all housing styles are available in all municipalities and that, people should be able to move to a different housing style in the same locality. Why should bureaucrats interfere in such a gross fashion? There is no evidence of any particular shortage of high-density living accommodation. DUAP's policy frequently causes affordable family homes to be torn down to make way for the new costly units. This reduces choice for those wishing to move to freestanding houses, such as when young families wish to buy or rent close to relatives.

Demographic research clearly shows that inhabitants tend to move to a city area that is appropriate to their lifestyle. Some prefer inner city and high density, others prefer outer suburbs and low density. DUAP's misguided policies will reduce choice if every municipality ultimately has to look the same. One is

reminded of cities that were created by totalitarian regimes during the last century - each suburb the identical shade of grey.

So what can be done? DUAP's deceptively enticing myths are far from reality. Urban consolidation will aggravate the very problems these phantoms claim to solve, as the crowded conditions observed by our returning overseas visitors surreptitiously creep into our neighbourhoods.

The effects will be slow and gradual but inexorable and irreversible. People may not notice the process until it is too late.

If we lose control over unsympathetic development, Sydney will be changed forever. Residents need to persuade the Government to change course. People could write letters to politicians, call talkback radio and join local groups.

There is no advantage in inflicting upon Australia the chronic problems of the overcrowded countries of the world.

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