

HISTORY

The Save Our Suburbs movement first took root in Victoria in 1997 as a loose association of embattled resident groups. In New South Wales, SAVE OUR SUBURBS (SOS) NSW INC was formed by residents of Sydney on 9 March 1999 in an attempt to save our suburbs from excessive development and from en-masse, higher-density rezonings, imposed against the will of local communities. On 21 March 1999 it held its first public meeting in First Fleet Park at Circular Quay. Speakers included Genia McCaffery (mayor of North Sydney council), Maire Sheehan, Stephen Davies (Deputy Director of the NSW branch of the National Trust), Helen Caldicott and Peter King (president of the Heritage Council).

Save Our Suburbs challenged the State Government to justify its policies by letter, by press articles and by radio and TV appearances. However the State Planning Department (now called "DIPNR") dismally failed to provide any acceptable rationale for its policies.

On 30 March 2001 on Quentin Dempster's ABC TV Stateline program SOS president, Tony Recsei, managed to publicise for the first time the driving force behind the forced overdevelopment policies - the scandal of developer donations to the major political parties. This subject has taken on a life of its own. Paul Keating spoke about it the following week. The Greens now make a big issue of this question.

However Save Our Suburbs found that politicians took no notice of submissions and protestations. SOS therefore decided to apply pressure where the politicians would feel it most – at the ballot box. Save Our Suburbs applied to form a political party but the Electoral Commissioner failed to register the party. SOS maintained that it had complied with all the legislative requirements and should have been registered. SOS took this matter to the High Court and won the case, maintaining that the case related to a fundamental point of democracy in our State; the right to register as a political party and have your voice heard at an election. As a result of SOS winning the court case, the State Parliament amended the Electoral Act, at the same time making special provision to register the Save Our Suburbs Party.

SOS subsequently participated in State and Local Government elections but lack of funds due to the absence of a corporate donor base severely limited electioneering. However the pressure has been felt and the State Government is beginning to adopt some of SOS policies (outlined below). The Planning Minister was moved and the Director-General of Planning was dismissed. The focus of planning policies is now changing. Instead of development being mainly centred on urban consolidation the emphasis will be on land release. The notorious State Environmental Planning Policy no 5 is to be changed from merely being an excuse to force medium density into single-residential suburbs to a policy genuinely adapted to meet the needs of the elderly and infirm. And the Commonwealth Government has announced plans to stimulate settlement in rural areas.

POLICY OUTLINE

Save Our Suburbs is determined to preserve the unique qualities of the Australian way of life. In an increasingly overcrowded world we have the wonderful luxury of having sufficient space in which to live, of not living on top of one another. We calculate that our towns and cities cover less than a quarter of one percent of our land area. That means we can have backyards for children to play in, for hobbies, and to provide us with a haven in which to relax from the relentless pressures of modern living. Space provides us with a quality of life that makes Australia the envy of the world. But this wonderful attribute is being stolen from us.

In an insidious manner, hiding behind councils and the Land and Environment Court, State planners (DIPNR) have been shoe-horning in flats, villas and townhouses where once there were suburban homes with front and back yards. They tear down attractive houses, bulldoze charming gardens and replace them with home units. Formerly peaceful streets are now choked with traffic. The State planners can provide no evidence that there is a shortage of

units to justify this dictatorial intervention. SOS maintains that people who tear down perfectly good houses and ruin our environment should be regarded as vandals.

As part of this policy DIPNR has been severely restricting the release of new land to accommodate Sydney's increasing population. The Productivity Commission in December 2003 reported that the resulting land scarcity has been a factor in escalating house prices.

High density doesn't just mean traffic snarls and over-priced houses. Other evils that follow include:

- We see concrete, bitumen and tiles replacing gardens and open space. As a result rainwater is no longer absorbed into the ground and rushes off, carrying pollution into creeks;
- We hear reports of overloaded sewers regularly overflowing;
- We face regular widespread water restrictions which show that water storage is now no longer adequate for the concentrated increased population;
- We experience electricity failures. Energy use has escalated due to power hungry high-rises, which depend on lifts and clothes driers. Increasingly units rely on air-conditioning as they mostly can't be shaded by trees or eaves and windows are often kept closed to exclude the noise, odours and excessive neighbour intimacy associated with crowded conditions. And large amounts of energy are needed to provide the materials such as concrete and steel that are required to build the new units. The rubble from good houses that get bulldozed has to be dumped somewhere. So much for saving greenhouse gases!

Save Our Suburbs believes in balanced State development, with particular reference to repopulating declining regions. SOS additionally suggests that rather than retrofitting increased densities onto existing communities, new satellite cities adjacent to existing cities should be developed to cater for a portion of the increasing population. These satellite cities should incorporate desirable features such as green belts, underground electrical cabling, energy-efficient buildings, drought-resistant plants and water reuse downstream. They should be of optimal size (with about 200,000 residents each). They should have street layouts designed to maximise access by walking, cycling and public transport. They should be linked up by very fast transport and communication facilities.

Central to all planning should be the goal of eliminating unnecessary travel by making the communities as self-sufficient as possible. This means that work, education, entertainment, shopping, sporting and recreational facilities must be located within easy reach of the residential precincts. Such development will not solve all the problems relating to car use, but will be preferable to forcing high densities into suburbs designed for low density.

With regard to repopulating declining regions, lessons should be learnt from the Whitlam Government's decentralisation attempt. The Commonwealth Government must take some responsibility. It cannot just assume as it does now, that the States can forever shoehorn all new arrivals into existing communities.

The Commonwealth 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.

Meanwhile, our existing suburbs should be protected — the character of neighbourhoods should not be sacrificed to ideological schemes with no foundation in reality. Please refer to the policy section on this website for more details of Save Our Suburbs policies.

Faddish dogmatic planning policies - of forcing higher density living onto our suburbs will make our quality of life worse, not better. We find it hard to fathom what is driving this movement. Clearly there must be powerful interests behind it, but not, we think, the public interest.