

The past decade has seen significant increase in acceptance of medium to high density residential as alternative to the traditional family home on a quarter acre block, and reflects ongoing changes in our demography – but in Lane Cove there is still strong opposition, some justified and some not.

Two factors that have long been key to home ownership in Sydney (as well as elsewhere in Australia) are that 1) the primary residence has been CGT free, and 2) pre gen X and Y have enjoyed the benefits of this along with car ownership to access the job that supported a quality lifestyle. As urban growth has impacted development density, traffic and congestion in proportion to proximity to workplace centres, a natural result has been the increasing frustration communities have with development and lack of infrastructure to support it.

Tim Williams (chief executive of the Committee for Sydney) painted this picture well in his article in SMH 17-3-15.

Sydney's population is growing fast. Now at over 1.5 per cent per annum. It will more or less double in size in 40 years or so. And like cities everywhere it faces the choice of whether it wishes to go up or go out. Partly because Sydney doesn't have metropolitan governance.... we are going both up a bit and out a lot.

This situation was also the subject of *Broken Planning: How Opponents Hijacked the Planning Process* by Patrick Fox in his Planetizen article 18-3-15, in which he stated that 'rather than generating a healthy debate on the merits of a proposal and weeding out projects lacking merit, good projects now die every day in a political landscape dominated by opponents to everything.'

The U.S. planning system stated simply, is broken. A process built upon good intentions has been undermined by advancing technology, public attitudes, and changing political dynamics. The planning process no longer encourages the kind of development and community investment that once served as an enviable engine for growth.

Our urban life and environment suffers from a system that gives priority to the wants of vocal minorities over the needs of the wider community, and this severely limits the scope for rational dialogue about development at both metropolitan and local levels. The subsequent impacts on employment, the environment and urban living is huge in terms of productivity loss, pollution and energy wastage, and quality of life.

Where the political focus was previously on growth of employment and the tax base, and investment in infrastructure and community development, this has now changed to dealing with channels of opposition underpinned by fear of change, cynicism and suspicion of the planning and approvals system.

Facing direct action from passionate and empowered community activists, local councils are responding to the fears of their elected representatives who are seeking support at the ballot box. The bigger picture issues are swept to the side in attempting to limit the local

impacts that are often seen through a sense of privilege to retain rather than renew to provide for future generations.

Grassroots movements do not organically spring up to support a project, but opposition groups driven by fear, self-interest and cynicism can take off like wildfire. Social media has given community the resource to muster effective grassroots opposition, and while proponents have the same resources, they are not so inclined to tackle challenges this way.

The political process favours the most vocally oppositional, and while a wider community may or may not support a certain project, they do not get the headlines or attention that result from generation of angst or fear. Certainly there are developments that can be judged as good, bad or just plain ugly, and this is where professional design review and community engagement is needed to generate better quality outcomes and build on a shared community vision. Our planning and approval systems need to be restructured to allow this.

The major issues expressed by local State Govt candidates at the Lane Cove Focus on Development Forum on 6 March were based on similar community outrage on recent developments, and that the State Government had failed to return planning powers to the community. A predominant number of the 100+ who attended appeared to be long standing residents, but their primary concerns were based on a status quo retention that created minimum impacts and did not threaten their comfort.

Only Rod Simpson (Assoc Professor in Urban Design, U Syd) spoke of Lane Cove's fit in the larger metro picture, and alternative ways of project determination by citizen juries (see www.newdemocracy.com.au) that can remove local bias or blinkered judgments.

Such objective review is also behind The Grattan Institute's *City Limits: Why Australia's cities are broken and how we can fix them*, by **Jane-Frances Kelly** and **Paul Donegan**. Recently released, this captures many of the above issues with both analysis and case studies. Investigation, measurement and dialogue are all needed to understand the basis of our urban malaise, and how we might be able to work better together to address the symptoms and find appropriate cures.

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