

Where is our Urban Tipping Point – or have we already passed it?

Tipping Point: it is defined as:

The critical point in a situation, process, or system beyond which a significant and often unstoppable effect or change takes place (Merriam-Webster dictionary)

The Utzon Lecture on October 15 by Professor Sue Holliday (Director of Discipline – Urban Policy and Strategy at UNSW) was a timely and succinct overview of the visionary and collaborative action necessary for Sydney to pull out of its nosedive into a congested, self-serving urban morass.

As media reports now suggest that Sydney's real estate has at last plateaued, perhaps we have some breathing space to ponder whether we have reached a point of no return, or whether this is the time to set an agenda and governance platform for proactive, inspired communal and regional planning that has wings. A real challenge for our new Minister for Cities and the Built Environment, Jamie Briggs, who stated "*We've got globally competitive cities (but as Sue Holliday asked 'for how long?') As eight out of every 10 Australian lives in a city, policies to make our cities work are crucial.*"

'Either Sydney will become even more congested and less affordable, or we will transform the way our city works for us. Which do we want? Prof. Sue Holliday

My recent TVO topics on social, cultural, environmental, working and human capital, were dealing with ways that local community can meet challenges of population growth, affordable housing, transportation, employment efficiency and still enjoy the important creative and natural elements woven into this urban tapestry.

"It's the 'outcome' that matters and the key outcome for a liveable city is connectivity". PM Malcolm Turnbull

Professor Holliday suggested that part of the problem was a 'village mentality' that had seen short-term, localised decision making because 'we struggle to see how change can be for the better and resist it'. This means as growth has speeded up, infrastructure to support it has lagged behind, and implementation of key strategies for health, education, road and rail systems has not been envisaged for longer term horizons – and is certainly not ready for the current, let alone future, growth of our city.

A resilient urban infrastructure necessary for housing, employment centres, health and education, and the connectivity by transport to enable us to move between, is missing due to 'short-term government budget cycle and the siloed structure of government. Transport in one corner, housing in another and planning in another.'

Our current urban structure and its infrastructure were not designed to meet the current growth projections, and the private sector is not capable of delivering a workable city without clear guidance. Governance that can include all levels of government, in collaboration with the community, is needed to work with the development industry in shaping future growth based on 'a paradigm shift in our vision of how to build a city that big; and a paradigm shift in our investment strategies for housing and for connecting people with jobs.'

Sue Holliday proposed six key areas where 'our community and our city needs action to start now to solve the affordability and connectivity challenges ahead.' – *to which I have added my own spin, and would welcome feedback from readers on these fronts.*

1. Implement better governance and leadership

The Greater Sydney Commission announced by Minister Rob Stokes must support integrated decision making across the metropolitan region, and scope for genuine partnership between all levels of government – *a challenge community engagement beyond anything in our past or present.*

2. Develop a genuine vision for a city of eight million people

To deal with a scary number translated into 1.3 million homes needs guts, and to start now on new vision for Sydney and a Regional Strategic Plan integrating a business plan for investment by industry and government. – *and with consultative input from the community stakeholders and private professionals.*

3. Use the Badgerys Creek Airport site as a major city reshaping opportunity

Program for the airport site as a city with a transport hub linking fast regional transport to an efficient metro one - *an urban oasis to regenerate the Western Sydney region where all the action will be happening.*

4. Mandate affordable housing from every development

To support the services sector, secure 300,000 new affordable homes by 2050 linked by fast, efficient transit to jobs – *a key to future productivity gains as well as making Sydney more liveable and workable for all.*

5. Build regional connectivity by developing Circular Metro routes

A transport spine along Sydney's 'global arc' from the airport and through the CBD to Macquarie Park, then three fingers to Norwest Business Park, Parramatta and Olympic Park connected to a modern metro system – *Lane Cove is well placed on this 'energy line' as a focus of growth and connectivity to the west.*

6. Implement High Speed Rail between Badgerys Creek, Newcastle and Canberra

Linking regional smaller towns to Sydney for choice in living and working environments, fast airport transfers, and connecting to a metro transit system so residents outside Sydney can access jobs - *and those in the metro area can escape to without their cars, and help transform regional areas into thriving economies.*

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