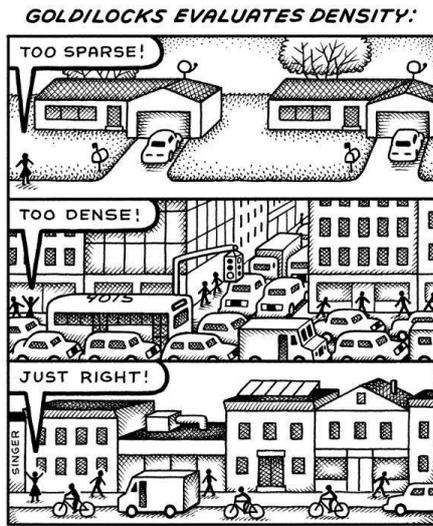


A Governance Challenge



This week's revelations about property developer donations, comments on fuel excise and car travel habits of low income earners, and a request for crowd sourcing ideas from the public all suggests there is a desperation in the political framework of our nation at all levels. Added to this there has also been media coverage on the decline in public appreciation of the benefits of democracy – and little wonder with headlines on ignorance, incapacity and inability to understand basic principles of ethics and 'a fair go'!

Our systems of governance are certainly under pressure, and at a time when the capacity for real leadership qualities is as sparse as open space on our increasingly clogged roads, it is most unfortunate that urban agendas that underpin the liveability of our environment are so influenced by political ones. The scope for much needed long term integrated planning is compromised by short electoral cycles, the nature of debate stymied by party policy and caucus consensus, and public confidence totally lost through 'envelope donation' lobbying so that real reform potential is left languishing.

An article in Crikey last week by Melbourne based writer Grant Wyeth dwelt on changes that are needed but seem traditionally difficult for the conservative side of politics, whose economic ideas are meant to bring change, although not necessarily in the way they wish. In Melbourne it appears that the angst and fears of 'progressives' on the development front are fuelled by both height and density which Wyeth suggests *'is at odds with the conventional progressive totems of concern about the environment and empathy for the less well off.'*

While the increasing benefits of inner-urban living and the proximity it offers without long commutes is now part of the real estate marketing hype, for many the large Torrens Title block and backyard are the yardstick by which many alternative residential typologies are judged. This freezes huge tracts of low density housing where potential for increased density is sacrificed on the altar of local residential character or perceived conservation values that often put personal concerns above those of the broader community. When suspicion of the development industry and suggestions of planning reform is added to this mix, it works against any real community engagement in the process of removing the roadblocks to urban renewal necessary for wider sharing of more liveable environments.

In Lane Cove a significant number of residential flat buildings have been completed recently, and many more are in the pipeline – some approved by our Council based on local planning controls, some larger ones through the Joint Regional Planning Panel and some via Voluntary Planning Agreements where a developer seeks higher yields through monetary contributions that Council can direct towards local community amenities or infrastructure. In the latter case for the Meriton development of the former Shell service station on Epping Road, and on land in the north-east corner of Lane Cove adjacent the intersection at St Leonards of Pacific Highway and the North Shore rail corridor, residential towers are higher than originally proposed on the basis of multi-million developer offerings that purport to compensate the community for higher gains in yield.

The Meriton building in the Lane Cover River valley may well be a very obvious ‘shag on a rock’ and far removed from the local village amenities, while the St Leonards development will at least be part of the high density family in that precinct and well served by transport and amenities – and possibly provide some non-parking units for those who might choose a lower cost base using their feet, two wheels or public transport to get around. But the Meriton project will no doubt add to the burgeoning traffic congestion along Epping Road feeding back towards a Lane Cove village already reaching its limits, and while the Lane Cove West business park is close by, it might be questionable whether the unit affordability or size will suit the potential market for workers near potential jobs. Perhaps a new village might emerge in the business park to service the Meriton tower and, with bridging of Epping Road, also serve the assorted mid-rise developments along Mowbray Road, creating a new walkable neighbourhood – but how does this balance loss of trade for the existing Lane Cove village against the serious congestion and parking issues.

In the Sydney CBD the Barrangaroo development is seeking to outsource the affordable living component, and nearby Millers Point seems destined to lose its public housing sector for a more gentrified market. Developers for the Darling Quarter are likewise aiming up-market at higher income earners interested in the urban convenience and trimmings, and nearby there are many student housing projects close to tertiary institutions – but low cost housing for less financially secure service sector workers close to their employment misses the bus.

Ross Gittins takes this further in his commentary in SMH 18/8/14- *‘the Grattan Institute’s report on cities as engines of prosperity reminds us that the longer it takes people to move between home and job, the harder it is to fully exploit the “knowledge spillovers” that drive the knowledge economy.’*

In order for residential density increases to be equitable in both location and supply, there must be consideration of proximity and connectivity for the wide range of our urban population. It is important that as a community we engage with these issues in a balanced, non-judgmental way that does not discriminate against those of our demographic that can least afford higher costs or lost time in their lives.

A Lane Cove forum to discuss such relevant urban issues is being arranged for October – anyone interested should registermore information will be available shortly through In The Cove.

Jon Johannsen 18 August 2014