

# Effective development requires a little less conversation

Endless consultation and regulation hold back urban progress, writes **David Poole**.

**I**N 1973, Gough Whitlam gave Sydney's developers his views on the problems besetting urban development in this city. "You must contend with these wasteful and irrational government structures, with their proliferations and conflicting codes and regulations. There is no need for us to tolerate it any longer."

At the opening of the Urban Development Institute of Australia national congress in 1983, John Howard echoed these views. "One of the great inhibitors of development in the city of Sydney is the plethora of regulations, stipulations and criteria that must be satisfied at all levels of government in the process of development," said the future prime minister.

In May, the NSW Minister for Infrastructure and Planning, Craig Knowles, wrote in his introduction to the ministerial directions paper for Sydney's Metropolitan Strategy that: "We need to think about how people live, where they live, how we maintain our world-class status, how we pay for the things we want and how we do all that in a sustainable way."

He said this because Sydney's planning system still wasn't working. After three decades of talk, the time for thinking is over. It should have been over 30 years ago.

Unfortunately, not everyone shares that view. In Wednesday's *Herald*, for instance, it was suggested by one group that urban regeneration in the Redfern-Waterloo corridor should proceed somewhat differently to the corporate model proposed by the NSW Government. Rather than supporting a strong urban renewal corporation, Caroline Pidcock, of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects, called for greater consultation and more discussions.

From the development industry's perspective, these views present a disappointing recipe for planning as treacle. They would mire developers, local councils, residents and, indeed, architects in the sticky goo of process for decades to come. It is precisely this goo that the Metropolitan Strategy is intended to obliterate, or at least dilute.

The architects' view mirrors that of the well-intentioned but deeply misguided bureaucrat. It seeks "thorough consultation and research" as well as "leadership that will find a way through the maze of conflicts". It asserts the role of social workers, urban designers and, wouldn't you know it, architects, yet at the same time aims to engender communities who "feel ownership of the ideas". The mutual exclusiveness of some of these

outcomes appears to be lost on those who propose them.

This view assumes there is limitless time for discussions and workshops, for love-ins and "how are you feeling" exercises. This is a fatal flaw. After more than 30 years of prevarication, we have precious little time to get things right.

The State Government accepts, for instance, that only 4000 new housing lots were released in the Sydney metropolitan area this year, far short of the underlying demand of at least 8000 new lots per annum. Its target of 5000 new lots is unlikely to diminish this problem, which directly affects the affordability of new land.

The Government also accepts that the planning system is a regulatory disaster, beset by duplication and obfuscation. The Department of Planning's own fact sheet admits the system is "bogged down in complex rules and process". There are 5500 local planning instruments in use across the state's 152 councils, as well as 3100 zones and 1700 definitions of parks, hospitals and roads - yet the architects and others call for ever more consultation.

To operate effectively and efficiently, the development industry requires some certainty. Uncertainty incurs costs in time, stress and money. As with any other industry, these costs are generally passed on to the consumers.

Getting infrastructure funding right is critical if new land is to be released, new suburbs created and urban corridors and inner-ring suburbs effectively renewed. While moderate public sector debt is one piece of the funding puzzle, just as important will be the promotion of public-private partnerships and speeding up funding for infrastructure. Funding should be provided up front for infrastructure rather than trickling along over long periods until it reaches sufficient mass for use.

While the development sector does not shirk its own funding responsibilities, it does desire a system reflecting greater consistency between local government areas, a better deal from all levels of government on the amount and timing of infrastructure spending and an openness to funding innovations.

One possibility is to establish a two-tier local council rates system which reflects real demands for infrastructure and which allows new-home buyers to repay their infrastructure levies over time. Developers also want some recognition that such levies and taxes are absorbed into the prices of homes and land. There is a limit to how much the rest of the community can reasonably be expected to pay.

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