

SUSTAINABLE CITIES 2025
SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING
COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND HERITAGE,
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SUBMISSION FROM THE LANDSCAPE COMMITTEE OF
THE NATIONAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA (VICTORIA)

PREAMBLE

This submission is presented by the Landscape Committee of the National Trust, a group of knowledgeable volunteers interested in improving the ways in which we value, protect and use Victorian landscapes. It addresses primarily the first of the themes of the Sustainable Cities Discussion Paper, the need to preserve bushland, significant heritage and urban green zones. The examples quoted are from Melbourne, but the arguments presented may be applied to all of Australia's large cities.

THE PROBLEM OF URBAN SUSTAINABILITY

A number of different issues arise in examining the sustainability of cities such as Melbourne. The need for more economical use of energy, effective water conservation and efficient transport systems design is obvious. An aspect of sustainability which is less often considered is the importance of maintaining our cities as pleasant and interesting places in which to live. To do this, maintenance of heritage assets is vital: we need them to encourage that variety of landscapes which supports diversity of activity rather than the increasing uniformity that arises from excessive urban sprawl.

The Australian preference for individual homes and private car transport has fostered the development of spreading suburbs and continuing encroachment of housing into the rural fringe around our cities. Already Melbourne, with a population of just over three and a half million people, occupies an area similar to that of Greater London, with a population of nine million. (The official Greater London Authority figure for London's population is 7.2m but this does not include those parts of the conurbation outside its zone]. With an additional million people expected in Melbourne over the next three decades, requiring an estimated additional 730,000 households, the city area will inevitably grow. Extrapolation of current trends suggests that Melbourne will encroach across another 5,000 ha of rural land within 20 years (Age Editorial, 2 Oct 2002). While an expected 90,000 new households will be in the inner region (Melbourne, Stonnington, Yarra and Port Phillip, 180,000 are expected to locate on land which is currently non-urban in the outer municipalities of Casey, Kingston and the Mornington Peninsula (Age, 9 Oct 02).

Population growth is not the only factor driving this expansion. Average household size declined from 3.9 in the 1940s to 2.6 in 1991 (Australia's State of the Environment

Report, 1996, p.3-7), so there are more houses for the same number of people: across a slightly more recent period, 1985-2001, house sizes increased by a third (A.V. Jennings report, May 2002). Thus Melbourne, like other major Australian cities, has a population density of 13-18 persons per hectare, compared to 54 and 160 in Europe and Asia respectively (Australia's State of the Environment Report, 1996, p.3-10).

Many of the consequences of urban sprawl and the high proportion of household income allocated to housing, are already acknowledged. They include greenhouse gas emissions from the building industry, housing and transport, high water demand for gardens and household vulnerability in the face of increasingly unstable employment patterns and a threat of rising mortgage costs. More recently there is a growing awareness of the health consequences. The City of Melbourne Draft Recreation and Leisure Study, October 2002, suggested that only 57% of Australians were sufficiently active for their health, and the proportion was decreasing: already an estimated 30% of the primary school children are overweight (Age, 27 October 2003). It appears that the spread out suburban lifestyle is at least partly to blame. A recent US study, reported in the Age (30/8/03), found that people living in spread out areas spent less time walking each month and weighed on average 2.7 kg more than people in high density areas, a pattern attributed to the perceived need to drive everywhere.

SOLUTIONS FOR URBAN SUSTAINABILITY

Many of the problems identified above can be mitigated through urban planning which encourages higher urban densities in order to reduce sprawl, but only where this can be accommodated in an overall aim, that of maintaining and enhancing a varied and interesting urban, suburban and rural fringe environment. The preservation of heritage assets, including buildings, streetscapes, parklands, rural and bushland environments is a critical component of this process.

Some features of our city landscape are irreplaceable. Important buildings of architectural and historic merit, and heritage precincts and streetscapes, are precious and irreplaceable. To maintain diversity and appeal we need to ensure they are preserved, and displayed within a context which preserves their cultural significance value. We need to see them from a distance as well as from close up, so the buildings around them have to be designed to facilitate this: they must not overshadow, dominate or obscure them nor diminish their heritage value. We need to be able to view them from close up, to walk around them in comfort, not squeezed and threatened by traffic and, where possible, experience them from inside as well as outside. .

Similarly, urban parklands contribute value to the urban experience: they are not pools of land waiting to be diverted to a more profitable use, even where this can be disguised as in the public interest. With rare exceptions, once they are built over parklands are lost forever: like buildings their value can be also diminished by inappropriate development that compromises their setting. Attractive inner city parklands also contribute to city sustainability by offering space for passive recreation without the use of fossil fuel use for

driving long distances to the country. Small patches of parklands provide space for picnics or children's playgrounds, but larger, contiguous spaces are essential to encourage exercise particularly walking, with its attendant health benefits for all age groups. The degree of patronage of spaces such as the Yarra-side bike path and "The Tan" around the Botanic Gardens illustrates the public demand for such features.

The emphasis on preservation of Green Wedges in the Victorian Government's recent *Melbourne 2030* strategic plan is also an acknowledgement of the value of maintaining open space. At best the wedges can preserve fragments of our rural and bushland heritage, and through this provide a rich variety of landscape and the opportunity for multiple educational experiences. School children can experience the bush and learn about farming without long expeditions into distance countryside. The success of the Collingwood Children's Farm shows the value placed on such activities. The wedges offer opportunities for active and passive recreational in an environment that, if effectively planned, will encourage public access on foot and by bicycle as well as by car, to varied and interesting scenery including farmland, patches of bush, natural creek lines and wetlands. Planning regulations must ensure this happens. Without clear, long term guidelines there is a big risk is those responsible for managing this landscape will give in to pressures for short term economic gain from rates and land sales, and the heritage will be lost. Changes which are effectively suburban subdivision can come in under many guises. Examples are the recreational facilities such as golf courses, which come with a package for several hundred houses, and rural allotments of less than 10 hectares that are little more than super-sprawled suburbs.

CONCLUSION

A sustainable city does not only optimise the use of fuel, water and mineral resources. It also makes the best use of its built and natural heritage by protecting and managing it through a strong and imaginative planning process. This must be aimed at maintaining the diversity and visual appeal of the city, its parkland and surrounding landscapes in all its historic depth. Public support for this must be engendered by ensuring that the resultant plan offers value to all its citizens through provision of recreational, environmental and educational experiences with particular concern for those who cannot afford to purchase and fence off their own piece of urban, suburban or rural paradise.

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