

House of Representatives Standing Committee on  
Environment and Heritage

Inquiry into Sustainable Cities 2025

*Presentation to the Inquiry 27 January, 2004*

*by the Urban Frontiers Program, University of Western Sydney*

The UFP appreciates the further opportunity to make a presentation to the Committee based on its previous written report. Our submission focuses on crucial issues and the steps needed to address them to ensure a transition towards sustainability on the part of Australia's cities. Like the Inquiry we believe that sustainability has interwoven economic, social and environmental components that need to be kept in balance. So we see this process as one that ensures that our cities are at the same time globally competitive, socially progressive and environmentally responsible. Our presentation relies on our own research experience, but necessarily draws on other sources at times because of the interrelated nature of the issues we raise.

We believe progress towards sustainability in our cities can be made by taking action in five key areas:

- striving for a balanced urban form
- reducing car dependency
- reducing energy and water consumption
- supporting social and cultural equity and diversity
- aligning decision-making and governance with the principles of sustainability

**Striving for a balanced urban form**

Urban development is driven by population growth accommodated by fringe expansion or urban consolidation or a combination of both. Progress towards urban sustainability should be related to achieving a balance between these different urban processes. Urban consolidation has been seen as a panacea for a whole range of urban problems, including decreasing automobile dependence, increasing public transport usage, reducing energy consumption and improving house choice and affordability.

Our research shows that the underlying assumptions of a simple and causal relationship between higher density development and decreased car use and energy consumption is untested in the Australian context. A number of complex variables and interrelationships affect both car use and energy consumption. Current policies based on simple notions of accessibility are misleading and their arbitrary implementation causes resentment at local level.

Medium and high density developments in their current form do not necessarily reflect actual preferences of most Australians households in terms of their living

arrangements and residential environment. This mismatch has occurred because developers and investors are leading the market rather responding to housing needs and choice. There is little recognition of preferences and needs in terms of dwelling type, local environment and location. Yet opportunities exist for varying and diversifying built form as many older suburbs built in the long boom come up for renovation, re-investment and re-invention. A crucial issue here is the Commonwealth influence on property investment sector through financial and fiscal policy. An equally important issue at a State level is that of land subdivision and development controls how these can be re-configured to enable the construction of the more diverse forms of housing that are needed to sustain a changing society.

Metropolitan housing markets require further research so that planning policies and resulting urban form are better suited to the housing needs and choices of their population rather than investors. Similarly Commonwealth fiscal and financial policy, as it impacts on investor and developer, behaviour needs to be realigned to produce a better, more sustainable, match between housing needs and supply.

### **Reducing car dependency**

The need to reduce car dependency is such an important issue it requires a direct and comprehensive policy response rather than indirectly by increasing urban density. Reducing car dependency will not come about simply by locating higher density developments near public transport nodes. It necessarily involves understanding contemporary travel patterns and lifestyles which have become more complex and dynamic. Our research shows that:

- suburban consolidation is not necessarily associated with reduce levels of car use
- relatively few work journey trips in Sydney from outer areas are made to the CBD along the radial rail network
- regional self-containment has led to much more diffuse travel patterns in Western Sydney
- new suburban, industrial and retail developments are highly car dependent

These new characteristics are a spatial reflection of Australia's role in the global economy, evident most clearly in the concentrations of activity in the CBD and developing regional economies such as Western Sydney.

A fully integrated transport system will be critical to both improving environmental conditions and sustaining economic growth. Our research in Western Sydney shows that improving public transport is the most important concern identified by its residents. The Commonwealth Government is well placed to invest in public transport improvements building on its role in road transport investment. In addition to funding, innovative policies are required to encourage local and customised transport services.

### **Reducing energy and water use**

The use of water- and energy-conserving measures in buildings and estates is to be commended. However there is little research into the energy and water use of

different densities and types of residential development including the energy embodied in the buildings and infrastructure. Use of energy and water is also affected by the size and characteristics of the households living in residential areas. The importance, effect and impact of pricing, regulatory and planning measures needs to be assessed and applied to ensure economical use of natural resources and equity in their utilisation by different kinds of households.

There needs to be more research and evidence as to whether urban hubs and nodes can be designed for self-sufficiency in the management of waste, water collection and re-use and energy generation, any more effectively than low- or medium-density residential development which are well-suited for this purpose.

### **Supporting social and cultural equity and diversity**

Australia has been able to foster its multicultural society without the segregation of communities as experienced in overseas cities. Our diverse communities have contributed greatly to the dynamism and vitality of Australian urban society and business.

On the other hand, the changing urban structure is increasingly polarised along socio-economic lines. To have increasing concentrations of people in areas of disadvantage reduces their potential contribution to society and their opportunities for individual development. Many of the people in these occupations are not well-paid, but essential to the effective functioning of the metropolitan community. It could be argued that an increasingly socially polarised city may lead to potential environmental stress through the separation of workplace and residence for many lower income workers.

The diminishing affordability of housing is a major factor in this social polarisation, driving low-income people into unattractive and ill-served areas of the cities. This will also affect the providers of many human services such as those in health, education, security, and transportation. Increasing social imbalances may well be leading to diminished health and well being for people in these disadvantaged locations.

### **Aligning decision making and governance with the principles of sustainability**

We need new processes of integrated, strategic planning and urban policy in which the Commonwealth government must play a major role in aligning national policies with state, regional and local concerns. An example of this can be found in the progress towards national water reform.

In addition to this vertical alignment is the need for greater horizontal alignment in policy and program development. Applying a "triple bottom line" to policy, program and budget processes could be further developed into a requirement for assessing its impact on urban sustainability.

The Commonwealth government has responsibility for national economic policy, immigration and natural resource management. Each of these policy domains has spatial, particularly urban, determinants and consequences. The Commonwealth, therefore, has a responsibility to moderate and manage these impacts in the public interest.

### **Recommendations**

Our recommendations are based on our conclusion that much existing policy needs to be extended, enriched and enlarged to take account of the complex, dynamic society in which we live.

#### **Travel and transport**

Policies regarding travel still regard this as a function of landuse and need to be extended to take account of life styles and behaviour. Travel is a major issue in its own right and should be addressed through a range of comprehensive measures rather than through indirect, partial and limited responses. The Commonwealth should not assume that urban transport issues are the States' sole responsibility given the crucial importance of our city regions to the national economy. **We recommend that the Commonwealth initiate a national program for sustainable urban transport in conjunction with other tiers of government to address these issues directly.**

#### **Urban form and density**

Existing policies on urban consolidation which are based on assumptions about future dwelling demand and located at points of good accessibility will not necessarily satisfy housing preferences and needs. They have also not been subject to rigorous testing in the Australian context. The Commonwealth government must recognise its crucial role in the investment decisions that influence urban form and density through its fiscal and financial and other policies. **We recommend that the Commonwealth government undertake an independent national evaluation of the impact of Commonwealth government policies and funding on urban form and density and the assumptions on which urban consolidation policies are based with a view to the development of more sustainable urban outcomes.**

#### **Policy making and decision taking**

Processes and mechanisms for metropolitan planning will continue to be inadequate unless the Commonwealth takes responsibility for the spatial consequences of its actions. More effective processes of governance need to be invented to guide the transition towards sustainability. **We recommend that a new Office for Urban Regions be established in the Department of Transport and Regional Services to develop integrated policies at Federal level.**

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