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Environment and Heritage Committee  
House of Representatives  
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CANBERRA ACT 2600

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### **Inquiry into Sustainable Cities 2025**

Sustainable Population Australia (Canberra Region) welcomes the opportunity to make a brief submission on this reference.

We make no pretence that we have answers to the questions raised in the Committee's discussion paper. Many of them deal with issues which, to be blunt, may well be beyond solution. Our focus is on broad issues raised by the scope - and indeed the very title - of the Committee's inquiry.

#### Our organisation

Sustainable Population Australia (SPA) is a national organisation whose vision is of "*A relationship between humans and the natural environment which ensures the integrity and sustainability of the Earth's life support systems, the ongoing evolution of natural living systems and the well-being of every person in a sustainable population*".

Our central concern is that issues of population size and growth are frequently overlooked, or left aside as too contentious, in debate on public policy issues. This is, however, dangerously myopic.

Incontrovertibly, population growth has been a major driving force in Australia's economic growth. More people, more demand for goods and services, expanding businesses and

growing employment. But the basic resources on which our economy and our whole existence depends are limited, and many are being rapidly depleted or damaged. The state of our water, soils and air provides evidence of the alarming extent to which demand is already pressing on supply.

In planning its future pathways, Australia must be mindful at all times of the impact of resource constraints at both the national level and in the wider context of a world where resource shortages are a significant and growing factor in conflict, poverty and despair. It is impossible to overlook the role of human numbers in all this. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone the world's population increased fourfold, from 1.5 billion to over 6 billion, and it is projected to approach 9 billion by the middle of this century. More people, more demand for goods and services, greater and greater pressure on limited and diminishing resources - that is the reality of our world.

### "Sustainable" cities

To be blunt, the concept of a sustainable city is a nonsense, implying as it does some ideal state where cities can be self-sufficient. Such utopias are patently unattainable in our complex and interdependent world.

*More efficient cities* is the best we can aspire to. Saying this in no way diminishes the importance of the task before the Committee. It is a protest against abuse of language and the debasing of a vital concept. Sustainability is not something that can be compartmented, nor allowed to become just another slogan, bereft of real content.

We hold out little hope of being heard on the matter, but we must make the point.

### The size of the task

The discussion paper does an admirable job of identifying the size and complexity of the task of improving the efficiency of cities.

There is an underlying assumption running through the discussion paper that Australian cities will continue to grow. This is to be expected, of course, against the background of explosive growth in the size and number of cities in recent human history, and the projections of future population increases for Australia in the period covered by the Committee's terms of reference.

Further growth, however, will add to the challenge of maintaining existing standards, let alone improving the efficiency of cities. We take just three examples from the discussion paper, dealing with preservation of bushland, energy, and transport, to illustrate the point.

*Does the inclusion of green zones within city planning result in further urban sprawl, which has a greater detrimental effect for the environment by encroaching on more surrounding bushland? (Discussion paper, page 4.)*

It is difficult to see how any answer other than "Yes" can be given to such a question. Urban growth, unless it is limited to consolidation within existing areas, must inevitably encroach on the surrounding bush. And green zones, however desirable they may be within an urban environment, cannot sustain the full biodiversity of the bushland which, in effect, they supplant.

*To meet future consumption needs and manage air emissions, the sustainable [sic] city must diversify its sources of energy generation and, where possible and appropriate, incorporate renewable energy sources.*

*A sustainable city would successfully uncouple economic growth from increased energy consumption. (Discussion paper, page 5.)*

We wish the Committee the best of good fortune in identifying the resources, and the technology, for achieving such goals!

*The transport logistics of a sustainable city recognise the need for a more comprehensive network of complementary transport systems with transport nodes forming the focus of urban villages. (Discussion paper, page 8.)*

Maybe so; but this implies a transformation of the whole structure and organisation of our present cities. How likely - and affordable - would that be?

### Conclusion

Making cities far more efficient is vital to our future. The task of achieving that greater efficiency is daunting in itself. Further growth in city size will only exacerbate the problems.

Unless humanity becomes far less wasteful of the world's precious and limited resources, our very survival is not assured. The more of us there are, the more difficult the challenge becomes to live within the earth's capacity to sustain us.

We must acknowledge such fundamental facts now, and face up to the need to adjust our national priorities accordingly. We are starting to do it with water - hesitantly, arguably inadequately, but at least recognising that things must change. So, too, must it be for our cities.

The Committee's report will, we trust, be built around recognition of such realities.

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