

Accountability to the Public for Urban Residential Area Planning?

The WAPC/DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING have a very wide authority remit, including advising the State Government on State-wide Strategic Planning. In the case of Residential area Planning they have opted to retain extensive control down to the detailed design of individual residences. That is through their issuance of detailed design and layout “Guidelines” and legally-backed directives. These have effectively determined, through the multi-layer Approval System, the layout, design and response to community needs; but essentially not local, and only in the generalised perception of desk-based public servants.

Although the ‘Guideline’ method was probably not meant to be taken as entirely prescriptive, it operates as the core of the System and minimises professional creativity, because Developers, being ‘commercial’ are disinterested in spending money on specific site environmental assessment and social psychology verification of rapidly changing client needs. That is obviously not Planning in either the true professional sense or the community interest.

Instead of the system requiring innovative professional designers, site-analyses and engaging social investigations on local client needs, the current WA Planning System “Guidelines” support and encourage (through the ‘Residential Design’ or ‘R codes), non-professionally skilled residential area planning, by WAPC framing those ‘hands-off’ (to resemble a standardised ‘Embroidery by Numbers’ kit for amateurs!)

Therefore in this case, since the planning outcomes are so tightly pre-determined and the level of power retained would require substantial legal process and expense to challenge at local development level, WAPC/DoP must inevitably bear primary responsibility for the outcomes.

A major problem arises from the System itself attempting to operate such detailed control on planning living environments for so many people, without deliberately setting out to involve ‘Quality-Assured’ design/planning professionals’. The public are losing not only that professional ‘Quality assurance,’ but also the on-going independent professional innovation and design creativity for comprehensive residential areas that they can offer. - That really should be deliberately required by WAPC and built into the System, in the public interest.

These omissions of planning/design and contemporary social relevance are glaringly obvious to anyone assessing the quality and practical outcomes of recent residential Planning in massive areas of outer-suburban Perth.

These areas comprise little more than inadequately serviced uniform low-density housing sprawl and typically comprise, visually boring, repetitive grid-iron layouts (*reminiscent of 19th century European cities amidst the Industrial Revolution*), inadequately serviced, anti-social, yet still being approved and built today. The WAPC/DoP must accept primary responsibility for those outcomes.

It must be explained that design responses to human need, for creating contemporary living environments are the ESSENTIAL FUNCTION AND PURPOSE of professionally educated and skilled ARCHITECT/PLANNERS ('civic designers'). It is primarily through their detailed and targeted functional client 'needs-analyses' resulting in creative/ innovative, three dimensional outcomes in built form - that progress has been made throughout the past two hundred years of world history in Building and Planning for People.

COMMERCIAL DEVELOPERS comprise the second layer of accountability following on from WAPC/DoP, but one that cannot be easily challenged, since they have simply used the present Planning System devised and operated by WAPC/DoP to their advantage, (to create especially lucrative businesses). Their finished outcomes have however most certainly not been comprehensive, properly serviced, socially creative neighbourhoods to support modern living.

They have been responsible for creating massive areas of poorly serviced outer suburban residential sprawl. But very few of them, (and precisely because they are in business as commercial trading entities with an essential financial profit purpose), have any commitment to immediate and future Social outcomes in their Subdivision/'House and Land package' businesses. The Planning context has however not been determined by them, they have simply responded opportunistically to the System that benefits them (above all) in the most profitable manner.

Their typical method of operating - to secure profitability involves -

- a) Securing land as cheaply as possible, with borrowed money.
- b) Obtaining planning approval from WAPC, (with recti-lineal layouts on flat land, completely cleared of vegetation being cheapest and therefore preferred).
- c) Providing the minimum services (e.g. roads, sewers, street lighting).
- d) Marketing and selling either just sub-divided Blocks, or 'House and Land packages'.
- e) Paying off the original owner of the 'Secured' land and then fully re-paying the bank borrowings.
- f) Then departing 'JOB-DONE' - with zero continuing responsibility further than that, e.g. for the social impact or subsequent outcomes in terms of community development - that planning Approvals did not require of them.

Unfortunately the rudimentary layouts and indeterminate housing they have left behind, are usually altogether lacking in comprehensive urban design, and leave already pre-set limitations on what kind of community and social interaction could develop from them.

To better legitimise their operations from a Community perspective, in terms of obliging them to operate more specifically 'In the Public Interest;' there is in fact no need to denigrate the Developer contribution, but rather to re-direct it.-

That would be by WAPC removing the facility for Developers to be the first to act on-sites; and broad strategic planning has only broadly nominated geographical locations where future residential development could be considered, but not yet formally 'zoned' them.

This would simply require WAPC and Local Authorities not to consider applications for approval of Development Structure Plans (ODPs) until the three steps recommended in the Paper already published on this website ("NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING – A PROPOSED REVISED METHODOLOGY") have been first undertaken. That procedure would be much more equitable, have many social and community benefits and make big strides towards far better Planning 'Quality Assurance' - in the Public Interest.

.....

FOOTNOTE:

From a broad strategic planning perspective in the Perth Region, this abysmal outer suburban residential-area sprawl is now so tightly packed over vast land areas that it will be prohibitively expensive to subsequently 'infill' to increase population density to meet demographic projections.

The temptation will be to allow further destructive land clearance of ancient vegetated areas of our outer suburban areas and Regional Parks. Notably, WAPC strategies have unwisely given a low priority in the recent past to conservation and not controlled the effects of such clearance.

Those natural areas are however not only of very high future complementary value to any intensively urban area, but also of inestimable value to future Tourism. Therefore, not only valuable as vital future health and welfare assets to Metropolitan Perth - but of additional economic value to WA as the Perth Region strives to extend international recognition.

The net result of the above negative factors put together, is that to cope with forecast population increases, WAPC should revise near term Strategic Metropolitan Structure Planning.- To re-consider an option of central Perth having an even higher density multi- storey and multi-level core; but with a series of self-contained 'Satellite' residential/ commercial/light industrial centres say upwards of 50kms further out, -with radiating transportation and green corridors connecting them in a Networked formation.

(That is on the understanding that the Perth region is suddenly required to absorb huge population increases and be transformed into a distinctive Metropolitan City, without losing the assets of its unique situation and natural surroundings.)

To do otherwise will inevitably result in highly disruptive, patchy urban infill in the inner areas surrounding the City centre, because substantial land parcels are required to develop sensible comprehensive community-serving structure at a selection of higher densities, into what was a slowly growing urban area of fairly low density building at 'town' scale.

.....