

Local Authority Councillors face unrealistic pressures in development planning.

Individual Local Authority Councillors are being challenged as never before by rapidly changing social needs that are often not being reflected in Local Planning decisions that determine living conditions in future new developments.

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In our present system of legislated development planning approvals, voluntary Councillors are uniquely depended-upon to make the direct social connection between the needs and opinions of local citizens in their localities and decisions that will determine the form and structure of new and modified future local living environments .

However, in their endeavours they are now confronted by major changes in community end-user needs. These arise from a combination of e.g. - massive and rapid population growth; drastic changes in personal resourcing of individuals' thorough rapidly advancing communications-technology (altering 'sociability' time) ; and constant commercial-developer pressure for socially unstructured low-density expansion of neighbourhoods into natural bushland, (disregarding the effect of destruction to biodiversity of inestimable value to future generations).

These factors are reflected in recent outcomes such as - suburban sprawl of poorly-serviced residential development and extended essential travel time to work, education and leisure facilities. High pressure marketing of blocks of land with seductive but misleading images of possible (but actually improbable) visual outcomes are constantly trapping many unwary young families into choices that in future they will live to regret for very practical reasons.

Such young families with children vitally need a wide variety of services to be immediately accessible locally, together with a supportive social community ethos. But the current process of Development Planning Approvals given to commercial developers for multi-block land subdivisions leaves these aspects entirely to chance. Such practical anti-social outcomes are foreseeable and could have been avoided in a Planning system that would require new neighbourhoods to be comprehensively designed and approved as such at the outset.

Local Councillors and their Councils for their part have varied in their effort and methods used to maintain up-to-date two-way liaison with local people. Some seem to have relied (too heavily) on - guidance from their Executive employees often based only on (generalised) directives and 'guidelines' prepared by the WAPC; - on sparse community responses to formal 'Public Notices' of development proposals (that few people read today); and - on commercial developers having supposedly 'consulted' locally.

However, none of the above players by virtue of their functions, resourcing, perception of roles or purposes, can actually know and reflect the detail of local opinion and social circumstances that is (informally) assumed to be implicit in the roles of Local Authority Councillors.

Some Local Authorities offer occasional public forums relating to specific development proposals or broad policy strategies usually led by Executive personnel; yet there are few if any continuing liaison efforts by anyone - to develop, promote and engage directly with citizens in on-going group activity that could directly elicit people-focussed futures thinking and materially support new community development locally. Perhaps not surprisingly because - whilst Councillors are community-conscious people, they are voluntary office holders, with a wide range of other demands being made on their personal time.

Some Councillors already feel vulnerable in that their local liaison role (hitherto vaguely defined as being to 'represent' people in a given locality) is being diluted with concentration of more powerful bureaucracies in the fewer larger Local Authorities that are being formed. Also by the recent intimidating centralisation trends of the Planning development approvals system that seems all too often to be contriving to over-rule their recommendations.

In fact however, Local Authority Councillors are actually now facing an almost impossible task of both keeping constantly abreast of the rapidly widening spectrum and complexity of social dynamics and lifestyle expectations in their local communities; and making wise judgments about the community relevance of proposed developments.

Even more crucially, the gathering and synthesis of reliable objectively-based information that reflects social perspectives and needs, has now become more essential to proper future residential development-planning than ever before. People-focussed (consumer) input reflecting local circumstances and rapidly changing needs is an essential aspect of the proper planning of relevant future urban development. But it is now obvious from observing many supposedly 'planned' outcomes in the wider Perth region for example, that typically it is neither being systematically sought or applied to secure results that will support - foreseeable future lifestyles, liveability or cohesive social community development.

Recent visible outcomes - of both inner and outer suburban 'planned' development - provide ample evidence that the range and quality of both the information apparently used, and its resulting relevance to foreseeable future community (consumer) needs is at present inadequate.

From an overall perspective on the Perth Region, everyone involved in Planning should deplore the current development trends as outlined above, and remember that it is people and their children who live with the consequences of poor forward-planning - and we should all vow to do better.

In this Region we have a magnificent and unique location for a major modern city-region and an opportunity to enhance it as a living home environment. We have enviable assets of varied and naturally bio-diverse land-form; direct proximity to estuarine and coastal water; and an optimistic, energetic, creative and culturally diverse population. The recently quality of results from forward 'planning' of residential development is not delivering results worthy of that rare opportunity.

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An obvious CONCLUSION from the above is that Local Authority Councils could usefully re-evaluate their own contribution to planning development, for that to be more quality assured and relevant to future local consumer need. Input from elected Councillors obviously now needs to be augmented for the important purposes described above. The intimate local consumer-needs awareness that has hitherto depended heavily on Councillors to provide has only been informally assumed to be objective, and should be re-considered in the current context.

The augmentation RECOMMENDED is that Local Authorities responsible for multiple distinct neighbourhoods should directly employ professional Social Psychologists to work within local communities continuously. Their primary role being to facilitate and then report objectively evaluated consumer-feedback to Councillors etc. that can be used for the future planning of, and decision making on, future living environments (so that sensible perspectives can emerge collectively from local people themselves that reflect their rapidly changing realities); and with a secondary but parallel professional role being to operate as on-going facilitators in local self-help social community-formation and development.

Ref. Another Paper already on this website (entitled 'A proposed revised methodology for neighbourhood planning') includes a detailed description of one way in which the above enhancement could be applied in an updated systematic model for residential development Planning.