

The Public-funded Planning system in WA, over-centralised, inefficient and out-dated.

Principle and purposes.-

The founding principle upon which the forward planning and approvals System that determines all Development through Approvals for building and land in WA was based is **Fairness -equitably managed dispassionately on behalf of all citizens**. It was supported from its inception by a framework of laws stemming from a democratically elected Parliament. That was at a time when the population of WA was small, the economy was overwhelmingly based on agrarian production and there were no large settlements that in comparative world terms could be described as anywhere near urban 'city' scale.

That has of course been followed by substantial population growth, consequent increase in urban population concentrations and changes in the diversity and location of new industries. More recently the rate of population growth in WA has risen dramatically and is now forecast to grow at an increasing pace. Urban Settlements are consequently increasing in size and number. New industries contributing to the economy have emerged and have diversified employment opportunities. Also the multiple effects of world-wide technological advancement have changed the affordable sophistication and options for personal lifestyles in the community.

The current Planning System response (typical of large bureaucracies with multiple functions under stress) – has however been to centralise decision-making and simplify procedures by issuing increasingly authoritative 'guidelines' in order to retain '**control**'.

The effect of such militaristic responses however, in the case of decision-making on planning of future settlements (and in the face of a community experiencing 'seismic' change in the personal resources available to it) is in fact proving to be socially counter-productive.-

Importantly, in the case of human environment planning – '**control**' is not a necessary prerequisite beyond arbitrating the fairness and equity principle being maintained. **Facilitation** should be the primary principle and is essential not only to extend the depth and breadth of analysis that must be done to adequately identify and respond to current on-going and future needs, but also to give creative designers (that are far more widely available today) appropriate latitude to innovate and open community minds to what is technically and environmentally possible.

Expansion and centralisation arising from over-reach.-

Unfortunately, the scale and complexity of this determinedly centralised 'Planning' system in WA has ballooned in an endeavour to integrate and retain overall control of two functions.-

A) The state-wide strategic statistical futures forecasting and preferred location - of industries, settlements and major communication routes; and

B) The attempt to control the detailed layout, construction of buildings and other associated real estate by hands-off involvement - down to a high level of minutiae (without the necessary and appropriately placed professional skill resources assigned to do so).

This large top-heavy public service system is managed centrally by a State Government Planning Department topped off by a Commission (WAPC) that has overall enforcement powers. It attempts to control almost every aspect of development planning, but has failed through over-reach, overlap of functions, and unnecessarily increased scale and complexity to effectively manage development in a community-responsive way.

Relevance and practicality.-

The practical effect now is of the overall Planning system clearly losing touch with the fundamental purposes it is meant to serve. It has stretched its detailed prescriptive control beyond its true level of capability (and ironically does not even attempt to understand local social and sites conditions). That control extends out to and overrides the authority of planning activity by Local Authority Councils who, unlike anyone involved in that central 'control' system - are actually, theoretically at least, in contact with 'real people' in the community.

This centrally focussed organisation has reached a point partly as a result of that 'over-reach' where many staff have muddled professional roles not matched to appropriate use of their talents - many currently important skills for the functions it attempts to discharge are missing, and if included at all are wrongly-located centrally and not matched to current community need.-

Such as – community-based social psychology, urban design visual conceptualisation, comprehensive urban landscape design, implications of the trend towards off-site manufactured re-usable building elements. (Including associated practical community-based research in all of the above.) Those are not generally found anywhere within this centralised system. Private practice consultancies have such broadly applicable capabilities that can and should be government sponsored, perhaps on contract, but they also do not need to be within a centralised 'Planning facilitation' bureaucracy (but not abdicated to commercial Developers whose priorities cannot be dispassionately in the public interest.)

Organisational overlap.-

The internal overlapping of functions and purposes of this huge system (that also overlaps with the role of Local Authority Councils), is also (*unnecessarily?*) under the direct formal control of a State Government Minister who is very distantly remote from the effects on end-user people in the community, yet is assumed by many to be responsible for the practical consequences!

It has also created a circumstance where much creative professional talent has been displaced from various parts of this over-inflated multi-faceted organisation to private enterprise Consultancies, who to survive and prosper have little alternative but to submit to their creative output being frequently emasculated by short-term commercial development interests - that recent experience in WA land-use development has shown, rarely coincides with the wider public interest.

Decision-makers beware.-

While it is perhaps too much to ask in the short term for the overall system to be changed, individuals put into the situation of being responsible decision-makers (at all levels) need to be aware of the current limitations and weaknesses of the system they are part of.

This is particularly relevant as the number of local Authorities is currently being reduced - without the Planning system and necessary functions at the local level being revised and updated to meet the rapidly changing needs of a more sophisticated and environmentally aware community.

The current local context for planning - missing links for community needs-analysis.-

The main current threats to fairness – equitably managed dispassionately on behalf of citizens, are manifest at the local level with the increasing disconnect between consumer needs and the physical development responses determined by Planning system that controls Approvals.

It is those local ‘responses’ by way of Approved Development that will in fact construct the surroundings for people that will substantially shape their future personal living and local interpersonal connections. That is what this kind of ‘Planning’ is supposed to do. It is primarily for and about people in a future context.

In order to do that, decision-makers must first thoroughly comprehend not only the range and variety of needs and preferred affordable lifestyles that the target range of citizens have – but also the change-factors that underlie the realities to which they are likely to be subject, and over the likely life-span of the built living environments being produced by those decisions.

With the present Planning system those essential factors that directly reflect user need are being seriously neglected by not being subject to continuing local community based research – in fact almost totally absent. *(However with a change of policy toward decentralisation and restructuring of Planning functions at local level, that could begin to be resolved - at the only existing interface between people in any locality subject to development and the approval system, namely at Local Authority level.)*

(As already discussed elsewhere on this website-.) Voluntary part-time Local Authority Councillors are at present really the only persons in an assumed position to convey essential on-going up-to-date local community consumer-intelligence into decisions they have to make (wearing a different ‘judgemental’ hat), on Planning and Development applications.

That assumption is however a monumental leap of faith.-

In the absence of community-based research – that is quite beyond the available time and capability of most local Councillors, typically this work might be informally assumed to reside with the very small ‘Planning Officer’ teams in Local Authorities, but is rarely attempted methodically. Their actual assigned roles are to prepare local planning Schemes that are broad strategies of intent and ‘zoning’ based on detailed guidelines issued (by the remote) WAPC, to whom they are required to be submitted for approval and then become legally enforceable); and to administer a regulatory function based on WAPC authorised procedures.

Note – all in the absence of local social profiling and environmental assessment of sites, over which this subsequent planning framework then ‘blindly’ has prescriptive control.

Those Planning officer teams currently have neither had the brief, the time, or range of professional expertise to research the necessary detailed and synthesised ‘consumer’ information, nor assemble essential information about actual local site features and conditions upon which development is to take place. During the process of preparing these Planning Schemes, formal Public Notices are placed in newspapers (mostly unread) to the effect that a Draft is available for local scrutiny and invites comment (only vigilant minorities do). Public meetings are sometimes offered with Officers present to explain them (usually conveying the impression that they have little or no local power to alter the prescribed process or format).

In the case of new ‘green-field’ peripheral suburban development, those Schemes are prepared, submitted to WAPC and approved without actual community involvement or actual sites-appraisal of any kind. Commercial developers use this opportunity to acquire the land, submit Outline Development Plans (ODPs); bulldoze the site clear of vegetation, put in roads and sewers, subdivide the land into blocks, sell off the blocks and depart forever with no responsibility taken by anyone for the resulting miscellaneous array of visually uncoordinated, socially-sterile and often poorly serviced neighbourhood. That process is being repeated massively around Perth and resulting in the extensive sprawl, excessive travel to shops, schools and work by residents and widespread avoidable destruction of natural environment. -

This is not responsible Planning by any measure.

Conclusions.-

The existing Planning system overall then, as a direct result of this controlling but disconnected authoritative centralised management is obviously failing massively to perform functions that result in sensible and relevant forward planning of settlements.

Furthermore, this breaches the fundamental principle of fairness and equitable management of outcomes on behalf of all citizens - that was and is enshrined in Planning Law approved by Parliament. In that sense at least it probably now deserves thorough reconsideration by the State Government, Parliament itself and perhaps the Auditor General.

The question will arise what future Planning creation and Approvals System do the community as consumers require for their future - fundamental review is now certainly necessary - and will be worthwhile, but only if the functions and operation of every part the management chain is reconsidered as a whole against the new and compelling change-factors that are now operating in the community.

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