

Local Area Planning – Absence of essential data and information/ the risks and outcomes of subjectivity in decision-making.

Based on the recent evidence of many unsatisfactory Planning outcomes, particularly in outer suburban areas of WA, it may be thought that that they were created more for the convenience of Developers than the convenience of the Communities who live with the results!

The reasons are complex, but include -

- * Pressure of demand for new homes and services with a rapidly increasing population and limited or no accountability by Developers after block subdivision and sale;
- * A seemingly abundant supply of available land; a pioneering tradition of ‘slash, burn and clear’ that still seems to be in the psyche of subsequent generations of early arrivals after Settlement; and collective ignorance of the long term value to the community of natural bio-diverse landscapes.
- * Relative ignorance of the recent revolutionary changes to citizen life-styles wrought by new technology that is empowering individuals as never before;
- * Failure by all involved to recognise the vital connection between site sub-division into random assemblages of buildings and - the collective social, communal, practical and visual effect of the resulting outcomes.
- * Failure to recognise that multiple freedom of individuals to build what they wish once a block is purchased (subject only to available personal resources and detailed Building Regulations) has the collective effect of ‘de-socialising’ developing areas and in turn inadvertently militating against creation of a ‘sense of place’ and local identity and ‘belonging’ somewhere. That is frequently resulting in anti-social behaviour, petty crime and risk to public safety - from the ensuing disenchantment of children and young people.

Furthermore, it must be admitted that some Planning decisions at Local Authority level will have been primarily subjective and depended only upon the collective knowledge, experience and wisdom of individual (part- time voluntary) Councillors - that naturally varies widely.

Councillors seem to have often made decisions based on very limited locally-relevant ‘hard’ information; and all in the face of expert persuasive marketing of Developer proponents and their skilful exploitation of zoning guidelines emanating from the WAPC.-

That is despite broad WAPC guidance being formed by Local Authorities into ‘Local Area Planning Schemes’ that WAPC requires to approve. But those are frequently still in truth often still seriously disconnected from Local social needs and realities as perceived by the Community;

and - from comprehension by anyone involved, of actual local existing natural site conditions that should be respected as a 'free but high-value legacy from past evolution'.

Essential data and information.-

The 'hard' information Councillors must have for responsible decision-making includes.-

1.) Reliable, balanced, objectively-derived information and data on - the Social context and various local Sites conditions, collected, translated into relevant current and future predictions of Local social needs and site conditions; then focussed for each project under consideration (and with advice on legal implications available, but not presented in such a way as to 'lead' Councillors to any specific decision). And –

2) Means of finding and comprehending a balance of Community viewpoints– since most importantly it is they who will be living into the future with the outcomes of Decisions. There is of course the basic legal obligation to advertise and 'invite public comment' but the results of that are often selectively summarised by employees of the Council, rather than read in full by Councillors themselves - depending on volume, and Councillors own choice.

That 'basic legal obligation' is usually in practice far too short-term, one-way (asking objection or none), and responses from advertising often few, and unrepresentative. Councillors must in future (from a Community perspective) continuously 'engage' in far more actual interactive dialog with the Community on 'Futures' Planning as developments emerge and not only on each project proposal. That 'engagement' can for instance be via 'Local Planning Forums' or 'Community Consultation Workshops' focussed on the evolution of future Local Area Plans – (There are excellent examples of these methods being recently used to great mutual benefit by a few of the more alert and creative Local Authorities in the Perth Region).

In larger and intensely urban Local Area Planning, the engagement by Local Authorities of professional Social psychologists to work within Communities, (*as detailed elsewhere* on this website*) would greatly assist Councillors and indeed assist also with longer-term community development - that is becoming more necessary as traditional face to face interpersonal communication is being overtaken by world-wide networked hand-held devices and synthesised 'virtual' realities.

(* Ref. 'Better Planning' Topic)

Councillors in a Planning Role.-

Taking this Community perspective further into Administration - there have often been uncertainties in the minds of Councillors themselves (*and the Community*) as to when they are representing the views of electors in their Wards and when they are acting in a decision-making role between the Community at large and the Commercial proposers of new development. Furthermore, Councillors have sometimes used their legal determination power without having much understanding of the long-term efficacy of the results of their decisions, and the extent to which those decisions in fact determine the future living conditions of vast numbers of citizens. *(That has undoubtedly been a contributory factor – combined with the ‘hands-off’ practices of WAPC, that has led to recent excessive outer suburban sprawl in the Perth Region).*

Although the WAPC, supported by the State Department of Planning (and the EPA) retain legal capability to over-rule decisions made by Local Authorities, none of these other Agencies is in direct contact with social conditions or site landform at local level. They essentially try to retain some over-riding control by issuing Guidelines and requiring submission at intervals of Local Planning Schemes, that are checked against State-wide policies and broad zoning intentions issued by the WAPC.-

Local Authorities currently essential to ‘Futures’ Planning in WA.-

It is therefore vital that Local Authorities with Planning responsibilities take Local Planning issues very seriously indeed, since they are the primary ‘on-ground’ link in the Planning chain that the Community depends on **absolutely**.

In practice from the Community perspective, this ‘Planning’ system overall has become over-complex, often seemingly opaque, and opportunity offered to participate almost non-existent.-

As mentioned above, ‘Public comments’ are frequently not even read by Councillors but briefly ‘summarised’ by Planning Officers, who are inevitably pre-occupied with legal compliance with broad WAPC ‘guidelines’ and other legal implications involving the proponents of development, but notably are not actually accountable themselves for interpreting the public needs and preferences - as Councillors are.

Too frequently in practise - it is only when the ‘back-yards’ of citizens are impacted by proposed development that communities wake-up to the need to put pressure on Councils to explain and defend effects on existing developed property. But since many new developments are outer-suburban with no existing residents, (other than former landowners who benefit financially from the sale of their land) questions and justifications about the social implications, form and layout of new neighbourhoods are almost never asked or pursued.

Community-cost Penalties of poor Planning.-

From a thoughtful Community perspective this Planning process is frequently now not only of limited value socially and environmentally, but leads to excessive overall long-term community-cost, in failing to 'fairly and properly' fulfil its fundamental intentions - that stem from the basic legal Authority of State Parliament. viz.-

- * The cost of poor initial Planning that results in excessive transportation distance to Employment, Schools, Convenience shops, and large-scale entertainment venues.
- * The social deterioration cost of poorly planned anti-social neighbourhoods with minimal recreational provision.
- * The cost of psychological damage to children in young families deprived of accessible, safe outdoor socialising and adventure play facilities.
- * The failure to engage sufficient professional creative and innovative skill at appropriate times to meet and take advantage of the challenge of very rapidly evolving and changing needs of a technologically advancing populace.
- * The needless destruction of swathes of distinctive and sometimes unique natural environment that in future would have been treasured by our children.

Summary.-

Communities will only be supportive of Local Authorities in a future Planning role if they continually demonstrate effort to acquire and take fully into account all relevant facts, information, and local views and make balanced decisions that demonstrate fair outcomes.