

IMPROVING STRATEGIC COMMUNITY PLANNING by LOCAL AUTHORITIES.-

To the average ratepayer local 'Councils' are the people to call if the bins don't get emptied, street lights are out, or barking dogs in the neighbourhood a nuisance. Perhaps rather more 'personal' when the annual Rates Bill arrives, but very personal when a Builder mentions that proposed new patio first needs Council Planning approval.

Local Authorities are seen as basic Services organisations, but the great majority of ratepayers rarely respond to Public Notices seeking comment, even if they do actually see or become aware of them.

In fact many L/As have become substantial employing businesses and although their main purpose is to provide local services to the community, they have some wider functions that are often not well understood unless citizens either become personally affected, or take time to discover what those are.

However, they do have to methodically demonstrate in public documentation, detailed evidence of understanding the wide range of collective and individual needs in all their different localities. Those must be recorded in a STRATEGIC COMMUNITY PLAN that provides a framework of clear and measurable evidence of delivery and performance-objectives for their BUSINESS CORPORATE PLAN.

Unfortunately some Councils, regard these 'STRATEGIC COMMUNITY PLANS' as mainly 'feel good' public relations opportunities and the performance indicators chosen are broad and vague, without real action-plan commitments with measurable objectives or timelines.

Today however, with unprecedented major changes occurring, both socially and economically affecting everyone in the community whatever age or socio-economic circumstances, many Local Authorities are losing, or have already lost, the capability to keep pace and respond appropriately.

One part of their responsibility relates to formation of future COMMUNITY LIVING ENVIRONMENTS, that should not be just 'housing estates' but fully serviced inter-generational provision with ready access to convenience shopping, schools, health, aged care, recreational, play and sports facilities appropriate to today's 'first-world' society in Australia.

That future PLANNING responsibility to many L/As is problematic for them, as they are typically not staffed to do much other than follow broad WA Government Planning Commission (WAPC) DEVELOPMENT CONTROL Guidelines. Whereas planning development for future COMMUNITY living at a local level, if it is to be 'orderly and proper' is a complex CREATIVE activity that requires at least detailed professional SOCIAL analysis and clear understanding of all aspects of the communities being planned-for and of the ACTUAL SITES where that will occur.

The WAPC however, only does broad 'high level' infrastructure planning to respond to population growth, but lacks exposure-to and expertise in detailed creative Local Planning. That must be based on detailed comprehension of the real lives and circumstances of each local Community and the full range of environmental qualities they need in the future.

The consequence has typically been in the Perth and Peel Region, very poor COMMUNITY PLANNING because of the major LOCAL CREATIVE PLANNING GAP, that has had to be inexpertly filled by commercial developers who have no interest whatsoever in achieving socially responsive development, or in conserving valuable natural features of actual sites.

They have been typically allowed to get away with clear bulldozing and subdividing land, marketing that at hugely inflated prices, using aggressive marketing with fanciful seductive advertising images, then running away with no responsibility whatsoever for the resulting sprawling 'housing estates' - with fancy titles, but miserably inadequate services, in continually spreading outer-suburbs at huge distances from work and essential major facilities.

Apart from the urgent need to put a stop to this commercial exploitation and artificial land-price inflation, the most urgent issue is to RE-THINK the LOCAL AUTHORITY/ COMMUNITY interface, with SOCIAL CHANGE now having a massive effect on people everywhere and destroying Community cohesion.

This brings us back to recognising the increased importance of all Local Councils having sound and continuously updated STRATEGIC COMMUNITY PLANS for comprehensive and environmentally sustainable future COMMUNITY LIVING.

It is now very obvious in the Perth and Peel Region that the absence of these has resulted in widespread urban sprawl of poorly-serviced housing and massive failure to plan for genuine future COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT (as well as unplanned total obliteration of huge tracts of unique natural landscape, loss of mature-tree shade and reduction in local outdoor facilities).

Local Authorities urgently need to abandon sending out basic desk-based questionnaires and formal newspaper adverts to supposedly discover what real-life living circumstances today are for their Client communities in their various localities (Those typically now receive only around 5% community response). Clearly such low responses are totally inadequate and unreliable as a sound basis for a planning of Services of all kinds to their local communities.

Using this out-dated remote method, most L/As are quite unable to understand how individuals of all ages and families are variously coping with the unprecedented all-pervading pressures of 'universal connectedness', both at home and work. Most adults now leading very busy lives, caring of young children handed over to screen-based gadgets, losing capability to concentrate, teenagers losing contact with family support, grandparents

ignored etc.- Overall DE-SOCIALISATION and loss of both personal and collective COMMUNITY SUPPORT and IDENTITY.

A more relevant means for Local Authorities to secure genuine and relevant facts about Client needs for STRATEGIC COMMUNITY PLANNING would be - DIRECT and CONTINUING ENGAGEMENT, through employing COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT STAFF (with Social Psychology qualifications), whose full-time roles are - 'Out and about everywhere in the various localities, listening to young and old on their 'turf', gently forming intergenerational social groups, listening-to and recording their preoccupations and ideas; and constantly working on the creative tasks of community-building.'

Feedback from their professional interpretation through this genuine 'engagement' would be in continuous reporting form, to Local Authority Councillors and their Executive Administrations and would provide a far more effective basis for the comprehensive provision of Services – and STRATEGIC COMMUNITY PLANS. Plus being overall a cost-effective initiative that would pay for itself in-

<Better focussed resource-planning.-

<Reduce waste of resources.-

<Better targeting of services and -

<Improved overall efficiency and relevance of Services to Community clientele.

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Some further explanation of how Local Authorities currently relate to the existing urban development Planning system in WA can be found elsewhere on this website.-

Ref. the Paper – 'FUNCTIONAL REVIEW, PLANNING FUTURES WA - this explains in more detail how Local Authorities are currently involved in land-use planning and also how the above proposal could usefully contribute.