

Neighbourhood Planning (a proposed revised methodology)

Obvious though it may seem, the **PEOPLE** who live in WA must be the **primary focus** for Strategic Planning, now and in the future. While that may be implicit and 'assumed' in discussions about forward Planning; the variety of change factors in personal living conditions, needs, aspirations and available resources are not being confronted directly in that way. These are changing so rapidly in all directions today that environmental Planning for people in all its related 'state-wide macro subsets' intended to assemble a forward looking vision, must be far more acutely responsive to all rapid change factors than it is .

It may be comforting to produce a State Planning Strategy to say 2050, but this has little real meaning with projections beyond say 10 years. Most alternative scenarios beyond that time frame can have little reliable substance, bearing in mind so many unpredictable forces in the world that much more populous and powerful nations than us will determine.

We must pay much more urgent attention to the actual foreseeable **outcomes for People**, that is for all of us, whatever we aspire to and wherever we live. The **pace of change in every aspect of life** for every individual and identifiable group is however accelerating exponentially, week by week; and is certain to continue doing so. The responses to that factor in WA at present, are however demonstrably far too slow. Forward Planning concepts and techniques must be changed to be discussed, communicated and updated in much shorter time cycles (year by year – certainly not in decades) to have tangible meaning to the community.

Currently the systems we use to plan and create environments, supposedly to be in tune with personal needs in WA today are frankly way out of step with even current needs, let alone those of the foreseeable future.

In terms of urban home and local community environments for instance, we appear to be 'stuck in a rut' based on traditional concepts of 'home' building form, context and function, that in reality bears little relationship with the actual resources available and the ways people use them even today elsewhere in the world.

In WA, HOMES and the way people use them and co-exist with others in local urban neighbourhoods, have for instance not evolved to keep pace with the myriad applications even of communications technology that people are using. Universal 'connectedness' for example has changed most work, travel, shopping and leisure options quite drastically. Such changes need new and creative Planning responses and experimentation and **should by now be already visible** in a much higher variety of physical environment options for all aspects of urban and suburban living than they are. Creative professionals are available locally to achieve this, but in terms of their deployment, we are wasting precious time, controlled and preoccupied with outdated Land-use planning and design concepts for living, working and human sustenance.

Proposition Statement – (taken from the above 'general' issues, to the particular -).

'The current Planning System for people in neighbourhoods, at implementation level does not secure -'orderly and proper' visual, environmental and socially-responsive, people-sensitive Urban Planning outcomes, suitable for early 21st Century living. This system will not meet the general and specific objectives of State Planning Strategies and requires urgent and fundamental re-structuring'.

Explanation:

Planning outcomes overall for living in Perth Conurbation and throughout the Swan Coastal plain are in general -

- a) not responding to obvious needs for community social development;
- b) not fostering a sense of individual Local personal identity;
- c) not from the outset appropriately providing essential and optimum neighbourhood services (other than road, pathways and sewers);
- d) from a neighbourhood layout and design perspective, generally out of touch with today's real - changed and changing social needs,
- e) not producing acceptable overall visual, environmental and creative external spatial relationships - and choices, suitable for today's 21st century urban living.
- f) The planning system that has been supposed to 'inform' has been seriously detached from on-ground reality and mainly for that reason, failed to achieve higher quality and more relevant outcomes. Instead presiding over 'churning out' poorly serviced, unrelieved low density 'housing estates' ill-fitted to their site locations, unimaginatively designed for today's living conditions and nothing much more – just not worthy of the title 'Planned neighbourhoods'. Even worse it has resulted in repeated, mindless, non-selective blanket clearance and destruction of otherwise valuable local ecosystems – (that *could have been incorporated* to produce much more visually, healthy and sustainable living environments for people of all ages, occupations and life-styles.

While the overall planning system concept and the way it operates is therefore overdue for a major overhaul, particularly at local land-use level, **it is still necessary at peak level** (e.g. via WAPC) to secure and maintain, **on behalf of the whole Community, an 'orderly and proper', Law-based final approval process, including a formal appeals element**; that can secure a fair and reasonable balance of inevitably competing commercial and personal interests.

However, prior to final project submissions for residential neighbourhoods, the current Plan evolution, assessment and approvals system is not effective, efficient, or capable of meeting strategic State objectives. It is also unfortunately presenting to and perceived by, the public as a forbidding top-down, 'highly authoritative and almost military-style steep-sided pyramid' organisation. (Habitually over-using the ambiguous and dubiously applied term 'will inform').

Neighbourhood planning and design mainly relies at present on inadequately professionally staffed and resourced Local Authorities to provide foundation sites analyses for all their localities (that is now **proved most cannot supply**). It is also depending far too heavily upon the initial broad land-use zoning provided by WAPC (that has **not** actually been referenced at that

stage against researched local terrain or existing natural ecologies). - Local Authorities in practise are thus 'obliged' to base their more detailed plans and zoning for all areas within their boundaries on un-verified guesswork; (*conceived and presented only in flat-plan 2 dimensions !*) really- 'the blind leading the blind' without a site-verified basis, for orderly and thoughtful Planning.

This defective and inefficient system is resulting in unnecessary confusion of roles and purposes, and excessive 'community-costs' to all involved. Furthermore, the system overall does not guarantee application of a comprehensive range of professionally skilled personnel to assess potential sites; to design and creatively plan neighbourhoods; or manage on-time provision of essential local activity/ services nodes that are essential components of them. Instead it has come to rely excessively upon commercial Developers who opportunistically (of course, since they are commercial) purchase land earmarked for development by, (as previously noted) vaguely assessed, and therefore premature Zoned at regional level, published by WAPC.

Commercial Developers are not however currently obliged to provide a comprehensive neighbourhood design service for whatever is suggested as a local population density. That **should be derived from up-to-date social research and site context evidence** and include designed provision of all infrastructure services. Their instinctive stance is 'what sells' (but only in the context of narrowly defined traditional options of home and land packages available). Most frequently what they really have to offer is only subdivided residential blocks and a seductively marketed impression of what the neighbourhood **might** look like some time in the future (if ever).

Commercial property Developers, either use their in-house personnel, or employ private practices - to land-survey and plan subdivisions (*notably hearing only what they choose to hear from consultants, but usually prefer to completely clear sites and remove all vegetation - from a maximising-profit perspective*). They apply for Local 'Structure Plan' (ODP) approval that the Local Authorities then advertise for public input – but there is often little local prior awareness of the perceived implications, for potential new or surrounding community residents to fully comprehend.

Following the above, elected Local Authority Councillors arbitrate/ recommend or deny approval (subject to WAPC sanction). The Developers then typically subdivide the land, put in basic services such as roads and sewers, market and sell off blocks - and depart the scene altogether - with no accountability to anyone for the overall built environment outcomes. Provision and design of necessary social infrastructure is ad hoc and certainly not on a time-scale synchronised with occupation of residences, with the consequence that most remain only - poorly serviced, anti-social 'housing estates'. In the case of inner-city homes, most multi storey apartment offerings today are inserted on 'gap sites' but not part of planned neighbourhood development concepts.

The Result of the existing neighbourhood Planning System at that level then is – that nobody is accountable for comprehensive planning of development, or the delivery of the fundamental Planning essentials – as listed in a) to f) above.

Summary in note form of the above issues (set against the State Planning Strategy) -

- * Sites resources **not properly assessed or verified**;
- * Sensible Zoning cannot take into account (**unassessed**) site resources;
- * Local social context and features are - **not assessed**;
- * Changes in local social structure and up-to-date data on changing needs - **not investigated**;
- * Development can't respect social impact - if it is - **not assessed**.
- * Local biodiversity threats posed by potential development (**not previously assessed**);
- * Local ecology potential for inclusion of being considered (**not previously assessed**)
- * Availability of pre-ODP Planning design guidance by Local Authorities is **not reliably quality-assured** (being often hampered by variability and very limited Local Authority professional Planning skills range). Plus Sites, Social and Biodiversity threats are unknown (**as not previously assessed**)
- * Impact of Developer's proposals are **unknown** (without the evidence of Sites, Social and biodiversity threats and opportunities, that must be available for quality-assurance of outcomes)
- * Developers are free to produce commercially profitable planning and design submissions, but with the system not securing means of accountability for social impact and quality of outcomes.
- * Developers are not formally required to research, liaise and guarantee that essential local Community support provision (e.g. completed recreational, sporting, educational, retail food services), will be locally available to residents on any timescale to match the proposed development.
- * Approval when given, with the **current** Planning System gives no assurance that the proponent will be the actual Developer; or that building forms will be co-ordinated into - a comprehensive, visually predictable, socially-relevant, ecologically respectful and liveable local outcome.

*This System then (as outlined above), is inefficient and is **certainly not producing appropriate outcomes**, when set against the objectives declared in the State Planning Strategy, (that is a consensus forward projection of human needs and circumstances in WA)*

Alternative means are urgently required that will lead to the creation of a much more relevant and higher standard of liveable neighbourhood creation and to alter the current undeliverable social responsibility placed inappropriately by the Planning system as it operates at present (i.e.

mainly depending on private and commercial decisions, based only on very short-term perspectives applied by short-term housing sub-division private developers).

(Note also that in WA, community input opportunities will shortly be fewer and more remote with recent steps to reduce the number of Local Authorities).

Summarised - *the existing Neighbourhood Planning system in 2013, as demonstrated in the above analysis, cannot secure proper well-designed future sustainable quality, social, economic, visual and environmental outcomes when set against the most recent State Planning Strategy.*

A Proposed Alternative system.- (with three preliminary components) –

*Local Community Planning forums;

*Site Analysis Team/s;

*Urban Design Team/s.

1. WAPC to initiate, (in association with other State Government Agencies and Local Authorities as appropriate) – the assembly by open invitation, of local **“standing Community Planning forums”** for all definable localities with designated development potential in WA. Provide them with briefing resources support (e.g. from Local Authorities) including, as required a community social psychologist support-person. Engage them in on-going self-sustaining dialogue about local and community aspirations. Meeting say monthly and then as and when local development proposals emerge. (These will also foster local collaborative future community development and a sense local ‘belonging’)

2. Assemble expert Site Analysis Team/s by competitive tender (or from Government Agencies if available) that will include.-

a) At least a professional multi-ecology specialist; and/or a natural Scientist that may have researched in the locality; and a terrestrial Surveyor; to provide a Site Evaluation Report; - detailing in this Report - site resources/ any distinctive features / surface and subsurface characteristics, obstacles under independent ownership, any on-site third party rights, overall site condition and whether protection or on-site conservation of any current wild-life is feasible; also recommending any pre-conditions for that.

Importantly, in the case of already partly developed sites (that will be essential to the increase of densities in response to population growth), to report where existing sustainable services, buildings, or natural features have potential for inclusion and on any advised preconditions. If the site includes; - existing residences, indigenous settlements, particular culturally distinctive inhabitants, or areas of cultural sensitivity; the Team to include a Social Psychology/analyst.

The above **Site Analysis Teams** to be **mobile and available with continuing work programmes** to undertake such work on sites anywhere - within broad regional areas according to demand.

3. An organisation similar to **WA Landcorp** be requested to organise (directly-employed or under contract from independent professional practices):-

Multi-discipline creative Urban Design Team/s (to include architect/planners; urban landscape architects; an economist-valuer, and a graphic design-modelling technician), to produce alternative sketch plans (in the local context of the State Planning Strategy) to demonstrate at appropriate densities, optimum uses for the site consistent with WAPC demographic and economic data; based on the previous **Site Analyses Team Reports** and the input from the **Local Community Forums**.

Those Teams will establish and maintain **direct liaison, to also include securing in-principle commitments**, to a time-scale, from all relevant State Government Agencies to provide Local Services (such as Education, Sport and Recreation, Parks and Wildlife, Transport etc.).

Again, these **Urban Design Teams** as with the Site Analysis Teams would be **re-locatable and available to provide** these services regionally **according to Development timing priorities**.

Funding for all the above to be **charged** (proportionally if relevant) as a '**Preliminary Development Fee**' to commercial Developer/s who may (or may have already) purchased and own part or all of the subject land.- These Developers will then be required to use these, or provide equal-standard alternative development proposals, (subject to some negotiable fee adjustments), as and if required by the WAPC .

(A base-line cost-benefit assessment would need to determine the minimum scale of development to which this system would apply).

Further justifications for this proposed alternative system:-

It is suggested that this new system would secure far better, more imaginative and quality-assured outcomes to meet Community needs, also without putting any significant additional cost burdens on the State Government or Local Authorities.

It would also have the potential to accelerate development, by on-going preparation being far less dependent on fluctuating economic and commercial conditions; availability of loan-capital and shortening the loan time-exposure for commercial Property Developers.

Furthermore, by reducing the 'cheap land spotting' and commercial opportunism deriving from the reading of premature, but unverified Zoning; long-standing landowners would be assured of a much fairer value for their land, as it becomes needed for development, than at present.

By reducing development time-spans, this initiative would also reduce earmarked temporary idle land from being subject, as is the case at present, to vandalism and ecological damage. Also reduce the socially unacceptable incidence of 'planning blight'.

Footnotes:

Adoption of this alternative system will beneficially affect large numbers of people in the expanding community. Also, the WAPC would have a means to be assisted in implementing the Inter- Agency collaboration required by the State Planning Strategy i.e. via the necessary liaison established by and through the Urban Design Teams.-

That form of on-going liaison will make it easier to alert and persuade other relevant State Government Agencies to incorporate neighbourhood services provision into their Corporate Plans and give them more assurance by improved awareness for forward resource-planning of services to new neighbourhoods and therefore assist their budgeting of project finance.

The exponential rate of change world-wide in all forms of electronic technology is resulting in enormous and unprecedented changes in personal and family behaviour. Individualised remote working for instance is leading to unforeseen changes in location, social relationships and increasing acceptability of higher density living, sustained with completely different supply/ delivery methods of consumer goods and entertainment. All of those must be continuously researched and responded-to by much more intensive and sophisticated tracking of changing behavioural preferences and possibilities at local neighbourhood levels.

Present neighbourhood planning and design system outcomes are now so retrogressive in face of real needs, that strategic thinking about them must now be **not 30 years, or 20 years ahead but 5 years** – indeed little more than the time it takes to build them, to have any serious chance of keeping pace with changing contemporary social and personal needs.

Furthermore, because the traditional forms of neighbourhood layout and building stock are themselves too inflexible to respond rapidly enough to changing human values, home and community circumstances; much more innovation is needed by designers and builders to facilitate three-dimensional re-usability and rapid assembly, both externally and internally.

If the need for all the adjustments proposed above and many more are not anticipated and realised through our immediate future neighbourhood planning and visualisation, the result will be an increased rate of social disintegration and anti-social behaviour throughout our communities.

(The Author is a voluntary Community worker- with senior professional design, urban development and environmental planning experience). February 2014.
