

Is Sydney Full?

Description



A recent article in the Sydney Morning Herald has declared [“Sydneyiders in revolt over development as two-thirds declare the city is ‘full’”](#).

So what’s my view? The common stereotype is that Liberal governments are pro development and left-of-centre governments are full of NIMBY greenies. The truth is not so simple. I sat up and took notice at this quote in the story:

“Significantly for the Coalition government, 61.7 per cent of Liberal supporters believe Sydney is full, 28 per cent are in favour of more development and 10.4 per cent are undecided.”

I’ve been meditating on the incredible challenges that Sydney’s urban sprawl has caused, and the legacy it will leave for the liveability of both greater Sydney and the Hawkesbury for future generations.

We are grappling with massive changes. Decades of poor planning, underinvestment in key infrastructure, and the pressures of increasing population are causing the slow erosion of many values that Hawkesbury residents consistently put at the top of their list as making our area special. Open space, continued use of land for agriculture, recreation and habitat, and the ability to both live and work within a reasonable distance of one another.

What is an elected Liberal Councillor to make of this tension? On the one hand, I applaud the State government for getting on with the job of building the railways, roads and bridges we should have had in Sydney a decade ago. To those inclined to a short memory, I am happy to remind people I talk to that 16 years of Labor government came with complete stagnation in infrastructure. Projects announced, reannounced, then renounced and quietly abandoned. Minister after Minister disgraced, sacked and imprisoned for pederasty, greed and fraud. Do we really want to go back to that? And on the other, the rapacious consumption of the last fragments of open space left in the Sydney basin is something I oppose completely. If the survey results reported above are true, a clear majority of Liberal voters agree with me. Studies like [Sydney Food Futures](#) tell us that, due to the pressures of urban sprawl, over 30,000 tonnes *per year* of food production in the Hawkesbury may be lost by 2031, and 400,000 tonnes p.a of lost food production across the Sydney basin. We would be foolish to permit that. But to quote the Lorax, *who speaks for the trees*?

To those who may remonstrate with me, my question is this: So when are we “done” with development? At what threshold, *even in theory*, would we say “this represents overdevelopment” in Sydney, when other cities in NSW are crying out for growth and investment? When, as the article bluntly poses the question, is Sydney “Full”? As a teacher, I’ve looked at this with my students, and I focused a unit of study on population around Dick Smith’s excellent documentary [The Population Puzzle](#). It’s required viewing for anyone genuinely concerned about this issue.

As a local government representative, it concerns me that our ability to even *contribute* to that debate on your behalf is slowly being eroded by an increasing centralisation of planning controls, gravitating towards the Planning minister and panels of unelected bureaucrats. Many decisions that Councils used to make are being taken out of our hands. The reduction in local democracy is alarming.

Yet, my Liberal colleagues counter, this is because the decisions that many Councils make, including our own, are grossly inconsistent with the established planning guidelines. The substantial time and money invested by people seeking permission to do, legally, what they *ought* to be able to do with their land is subjected to the caprice and thought-bubbles of quixotic Councillors. Some of the decisions taken by our Council in the last year baffle me. Regretfully, the rank situation in Councils like Auburn, where developer Sam Mehajer brought the whole process of local government into disrepute, has caused *all* Councils, including our own, to be tarred with the same brush, and to be subjected to the same extreme corrective measures.

Again, both views represent facets of a larger truth.

I’m thinking and reading deeply on this matter and will have more to say in the future. In the meantime, I want to know what you think. Please let me know in the comments.

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