

The Sydney ant-hill: a modern tragedy.

Opinion



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Councillor

As a high school teacher, I like to run a lesson about an obscure concept called 'the Tragedy of the Commons'.

It starts with buying milk at the shops. There you are in Coles or Aldi. Two bottles of milk sit next to each other, one with a use-by date five days from now, and another with ten. You know that you'd easily get through either bottle before the due date, but you do what most people would do, and reach for the freshest milk regardless.

Economists have long known that this is how people behave. Understandably, people make decisions that are best for themselves in that moment; the broader good of society isn't on their mind.

The problem comes when everyone makes those 'best for me' decisions. In our example, perfectly good milk just a couple of days older gets left on the shelf until it ages past its use-by, spoils, and is thrown out.

I offer my students this metaphor as a stimulus, not merely to give them a complex about buying milk. I encourage them to find connections between the story and larger, more serious real-world issues. When we over-fish the oceans, power our society with resources we know will someday run out, overuse antibiotics, or sacrifice agricultural land for housing without regard to the sustainability of these choices, then we are playing out the same 'tragedy of the commons' on ever larger stages. Our individual decisions remain rational and yield us short term ease and comfort. But they are collectively bad for our descendants because the bill is generationally deferred.

This is never more obvious than when we consider Sydney's boundless addiction to urban growth.

Former Labor Premier Bob Carr famously declared that Sydney was "full" back in 2000. Since then, Sydney has grown by another third. That's over 1.3 million people. Carr's successors in the current Labor government manifestly no longer share his assessment, secretly targeting a range of suburbs for massive new growth and unprecedented densification. Are we next?

The risks of fire and flood strongly bracket what kind of growth the Hawkesbury can endure. Hawkesbury Council's housing policy suggests we could build more medium density housing around our major centres of Windsor and Richmond.

However, State Planning Minister Paul Scully is sending conflicting messages to us, writing on the one hand to our Mayor to enjoin us to do our share in creating 377,000 new housing com-

mencements by 2029, and yet warning us that a new Floodplain Evacuation Study places strong constraints on how much development the Hawkesbury can sustain. I think we need much clearer guidance about what is being expected of us.

Many of you now face a daily multi-hour commute, plus an annual toll bill running into the thousands just to get to work. The alternative is to brave our rail line which lacks a promised connection to the Metro at Schofields, offers no express trains, poor parking, and which has had no upgrade since electrification in 1991. Already-approved housing developments will only exacerbate this problem – lamentable considering we are still catching up on the infrastructure necessitated by the last decade of growth.

"We deserve better, and we owe better to our successors. That process starts by ensuring that the elected representatives on our Councils and Parliaments are not in the pockets of developers."

Worse, the Hawkesbury's youth are being squeezed out of their ability to remain in the communities that they grew up in and feel an affinity for, increasingly unable to afford to either buy or rent. Many are forced to move away, increasing social isolation and losing the benefits of family support.

Council could do more to ease this by implementing affordable housing mandates in new estates, diversifying our housing mix, and permitting more generous granny flats and secondary dwellings on house blocks under one title. I have supported such changes, but progress has been far too slow.

However, the biggest factor in this squeeze, and only grudgingly admitted by politicians, is Australia's level of migration.

A post-COVID surge saw a record-breaking annual 615,400 arriv-

als to mid-2023. After accounting for departures, deaths and births, overseas migration represents 77% of Australia's population growth (data: Federal Centre for Population Projections).

Astonishingly, in NSW the figure is closer to 98% (data: .id research, Sept 2023). Read that again: 98% of all the pressure for new housing, associated infrastructure and congestion in Sydney comes from overseas growth. Think about that when you're stuck in traffic, and for heaven's sake, think about it when you vote.

Governments at every level have had this infatuation with 'growth at any cost' since the end of World War 2, spurred by some economists, developers and their lobby groups. For example the Urban Development Institute talks incessantly about the need to unlock land supply, fast track approval pathways, lower infrastructure co-contributions while increasing the density and height limits on tenements.

All these factors affect the supply side, yet they studiously ignore the demand side caused by migration. They ignore a fundamental truth – No growth is limitless. In biology we call a body that seeks to grow without bound 'cancer'.

Sadly, Labor and Liberal governments have been happy to march to this tune. They claim that housing unaffordability is the price we pay for the stimulus to the broader economy, and to the construction sector in particular. These and other concerns like balancing the inter-generational ratio of taxpaying Australians to retirees and pension recipients are valid, but if there are winners and losers in such national tradeoffs, too many of the losers seem to be concentrated at the outer fringes of our major cities, where we suffer congestion and crushing cost-of-living challenges.

Skilled migration should be a part of Australia's future, but 615,400 arrivals – most of whom gravitate to Australia's major cities, is too much. It would be prudent to reduce migration until the

infrastructure backlog is addressed, and proper incentives formulated to encourage new arrivals to settle in Australia's regions. It's disgraceful that despite this elephant in the room, successive governments have never set a population target, or properly investigated what Australia's 'ideal' population or rate of growth should be. Every study you'll read merely attempts to reactively model the low, medium and high growth scenarios that 'might' happen because there is no population policy, and never has been.

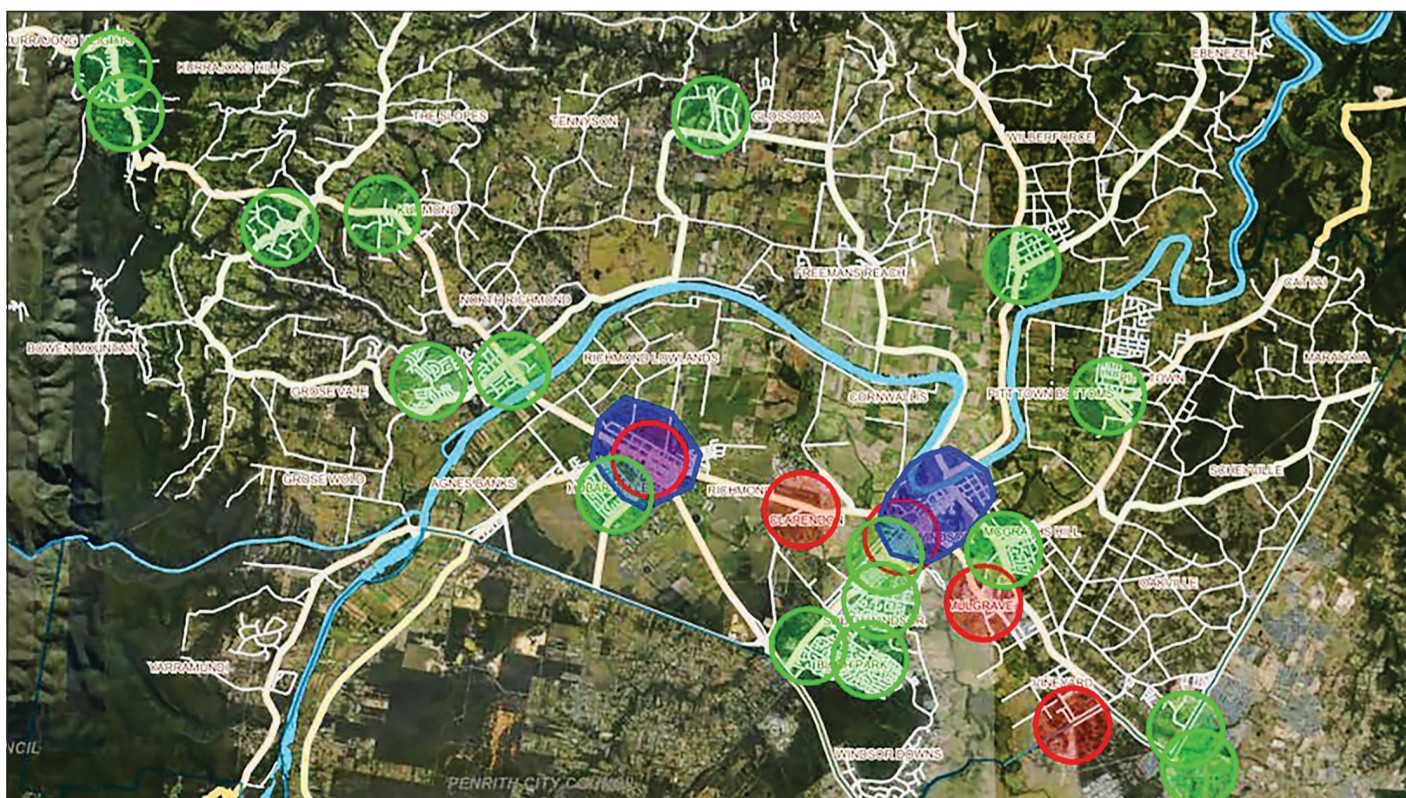
If you drive through the 'instant suburbs' that have sprung up near the Hawkesbury, we see a style of development that is neither pleasing to the eye, nor representative of anything we should seek to emulate. Tiny blocks, no eaves, no trees, black roofs. Nevertheless, I have a growing folder of examples of realtors hawking nearby greenfield lands in the Hawkesbury to developers, tantalising them that these lands too will inevitably be rezoned and absorbed into the Sydney anthill, yielding much profit to their investors. Beleaguered landowners are faced with an invidious choice; be taxed off their land when speculation triples their land value (and therefore their rates), or give in to land-bankers who don't care about the erosion to our sense of community.

Hawkesbury residents deserve more agency in determining the shape and scale of development in our city, rather than be carried along in the current of a fatalistic belief that more urban sprawl can't be avoided, and will continue forever. In such a historic and beautiful area, we deserve better, and we owe better to our successors.

That process starts by ensuring that the elected representatives on our Councils and Parliaments are not in the pockets of developers.

Like the dilemma facing you in the milk aisle, our 'tragedy of the commons' is our addiction to unfettered growth. It might serve a logical, beneficial short term goal, but it is gradually undoing the threads of what it is that makes the Hawkesbury such a pleasant place to live.

Nathan Zamprogno is an independent Councillor on Hawkesbury City Council and a local high school teacher. These views are his own and do not represent Council.



The circles represent zones identified by the State Government's new proposed housing rules that could permit flats of up to eight stories. Council has resolved to oppose this plan.

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