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'House full' sign goes up in Sydney



Citation

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Abstract: There is no doubt that many people feel Sydney is overdeveloped. The statement last week by the Premier, Bob Carr, that the city is full and

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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By WINSOME BYRNE

ILLUS: Crowding in ... quality-of-life issues will be discussed at an upcoming urban design seminar.

There is no doubt that many people feel Sydney is overdeveloped. The statement last week by the Premier, Bob Carr, that the city is full and can't handle a bigger population, signals the same message.

The outcome of the local government elections last September clearly reflected voters' concerns about development issues. Research carried out by Kogarah Municipal Council six weeks before the polls showed that 40 per cent of people were concerned about overdevelopment and that this would affect how they voted.

The next most important issues were traffic (30 per cent), waterways (9 per cent) and environmental problems (6 per cent).

When you bundle these together they add up to concern about urban quality, or amenity as it is sometimes called.

This, according to the mayor of Kogarah, Councillor Sam Witheridge, was the main perhaps the only driver in the way people voted.

"Even in the State election, that was the main issue to come out. It was as big as law and order," he says.

Dr Mike Mouritz, from Kogarah Council, will be a keynote speaker at a seminar, called Urban Design at the Millennium, later this month. The seminar is being organised by the Local Government and Shires Association and the Urban Design Advisory Service.

"Urban consolidation has been almost an unchallenged orthodoxy for some years," Witheridge says. But the outcome of the local elections means that development proposals will need to be subject to far more critical analysis.

Witheridge believes that the Department of Urban Affairs and Planning has not been stringent enough in devising planning policies. He has proposed a five-point plan for discussion at the design seminar, including making it a condition of approval that chartered architects design multi-unit developments. "Many major multi-unit developments are not designed by architects," he says.

"Councils can't impose this condition, but it is a significant impediment to achieving excellence or even adequacy in urban design. Even when the applicant is trying to incorporate the council's policies, if the design has been prepared by a draughtsman, they don't have the skills base to do what the council wants.

"That may mean that no matter how hard they try to

work with the council to achieve what the council wants, and no matter how hard we work with them, we can't achieve those principles."

And in developments over a certain size, Witheridge believes the architect who designs the project should also be its managing architect: "As building proceeds, changes are often required and it's better if the managing architect is the person who designed the development because then you can make sure the integrity of the original plan is retained."

Kogarah Council has insisted on this in its urban village development, but it is only able to do so because the council owns the property. It is rare that the consent authority is also the property owner.

Another problem Witheridge sees is the inability of councils to recover the full cost of assessing development applications, which may involve bringing in outside professionals. This is a particular problem for smaller councils, because their financial ability to consult someone, like an environmental strategist, is limited.

Witheridge says the council is entitled to charge only \$2,800 for assessing a project estimated to cost \$2 million.

"That amount of \$2,800 may be enough to pay for routine things, but if there is an extensive community consultation process, that fee may not cover the council's costs particularly if it is a controversial proposal," he says.

"And if you need to call in an urban designer, consultant architect, or landscape architect, the cost gets even higher."

As it is, this advice is either not sought or, if it is, ratepayers subsidise its cost. Or sometimes resources which should go to something else are diverted to assessing a big development project, many of which are speculative.

Witheridge says that in its recent review of fees for development control services, the Independent

Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal recommended that councils should be able to set fees commensurate with the cost of assessing proposals as long as they followed proper accounting procedures and didn't profit out of it.

He believes developers would welcome this change as long as there were reasonable time requirements on the council.

"I don't think they would object to more expensive and rigorous assessment as long as they are not subject to untimely delays, which can be very costly," Witheridge says.

The mayor would also like to see stricter environmental requirements incorporated in development design.

One would be that all stormwater would be collected on site, then treated and recycled, so that it doesn't end up in the stormwater system.

He says councils can't afford to put gross pollutant traps on every stormwater outlet and, by collecting and reusing water on site, the waterways would be better protected.

He would also like to see the repeal of the State environmental planning policies number 5 and 53.

"SEPP 5 allows multi-unit developments in single dwelling areas even when they're not zoned for it providing they're sold to people over the age of 55," Witheridge says.

"But this is open to abuse because people can just put the places in their parents' name. It also circumvents community-based planning controls.

"SEPP 53 requires that all councils have policies to increase urban density."

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