Urban Density

Committee for Melbourne strongly advocates in favour of a more compact city and believes this should be achieved by encouraging a greater mix of high and medium density development within strategic inner urban locations.

The Committee believes fringe growth needs to be constrained and inner and middle suburban locations should be prioritised for diverse employment and housing development.

In order to retain liveability and constrain increasing growth pressures, the Committee believes the current urban growth boundary should be fixed.

Since the 1920s, Melbourne’s population density has declined from 2,700 to around 1,455 persons per square kilometre in 2001. Despite more apartments being built in Melbourne’s inner suburbs (slightly reversing the trend), the density of Australia’s second most densely populated city was recorded at 1,566 persons per square kilometre in 2006.

While urban planning in Melbourne has historically supported urban expansion and subsequent decreasing in density through principles such as the quarter acre block - although this concept left city planning a long time ago – the legacy of these principles remain in the current metropolitan form.

In recent years, the trend towards bigger blocks has begun to reverse, largely through a market response designed to contain housing prices, and more recently, governments recognising the need to reduce land consumption.

As a result, Melbourne @ 5 million saw the introduction of our current density targets of 15 dwellings per hectare for growth areas.

Committee for Melbourne strongly supports the need for a more compact city and the introduction of density targets; however, a target of 15 dwellings per hectare is well short of the densities achieved in (now) inner Melbourne in the 19th century.

Although there is evidence of a shift towards higher density forms of housing within the inner suburbs of Melbourne; according to the Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics (BITRE), between 2001 and 2010, roughly 60 per cent of Melbourne’s population growth occurred in the outer suburban councils (i.e. Casey, Cardinia, Wyndham, Hume, Whittlesea and Melton) where large detached housing stock still dominates.

The growth in Melbourne’s outer suburbs creates a number of significant environmental, social and economic challenges for a car-dependant city, which had 77 per cent of employed residents commuting to work by private vehicle in 2006.

If Melbourne is to retain its liveability and productivity in the face of increasing growth pressures there must be a targeted approach to intensify development within the inner and middle suburbs.

Population growth, Melbourne, by sub-region 2001-2010

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1 VCEC, Making The Right Options for Managing Transport Congestion, September 2006
2 DPCD, Melbourne @ 5 Million, December 2008
3 BitRE, Population Growth, Jobs and Commuting Flows in Melbourne, October 2011
4 BITRE, Population Growth, Jobs and Commuting Flows in Melbourne, October 2011