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State Planning Policy Framework Review

Submission by *Save Our Suburbs Inc. (Vic)*, February 2010

INTRODUCTION

Our comments are necessarily brief due to the lack of time available to effectively consider the Draft. Only a token amount of time has been allowed for submissions to the SPPF Review (and over the summer break at that!). We would have made more comprehensive comment had there been more opportunity to respond to the Draft.

Frequent references to the flawed M2030 policy are a concern, as are references in the Draft to the UGB, activity centres and continuing confusion over the degree of weight implied by phrases in some policies.

Our overall concern is that this review, as with the P&E Act Review and other changes to the planning regime over the last decade, has tended to weaken planning controls in the short-term economic interest. However, in the face of the current crises of peak oil and climate change (chronic or worsening drought, bushfires and water shortages), any planning system that tries to cope with these scenarios will need to be MORE prescriptive and more reflective of specific government long-term policies to direct development/regeneration/new infrastructure to where it's needed in the interests of building a more functional, livable, sustainable city.

M2030:

It is problematic after the critical M2030 Audit Report and the superseding of M2030 by Melbourne@% million, that M2030 is a key reference policy for most of the elements of the draft SPPF. The Audit pointed out that M2030 lacked concrete implementation controls to guide appropriate higher density development into activity centres and consequently that (as the Age pointed out more succinctly) M2030 had

not achieved its goals of focusing new residential development in activity centres while maintaining the Urban Growth Boundary and protecting existing low-rise suburbs (ie, limiting out-of-character infill development).

The Audit also recommended a number of ways that M2030 could be better implemented by coordinating support across all government departments. The least effective way, the Audit stated, would be to leave the implementation of M2030 in the hands of a group within DPCD/DSE. Since that option was the one chosen, we have little faith that either the department or the government appreciate the need for more prescription and better departmental coordination in planning, and especially the need for more tools to focus development more appropriately (including the provision of the necessary infrastructure).

Lack of Definition of Planning Terms:

The Review acknowledges that phrases such as ‘must have regard to’, ‘should be consistent with’, and ‘must be consistent with’, are used in the present SPPF without any consideration of the weighting they infer, and that these terms have been standardized to “*must (or should) have regard to*”.

There may now be no *relative* differences but the basic confusion still remains - there is still no definition of what “regard” means or what *degree of exercise of discretion* will guide the interpretation of “should have regard to”. The planning regime desperately needs more prescription to provide all parties with certainty and to more effectively guide appropriate development into the most appropriate locations. (Also see comments on “in and around” below)

Activity Centres:

Higher density housing and mixed use in activity centres can only function as theoretically intended if centres are located at major transport nodes. This means at least trams but principally light or heavy rail services - not just buses, which contribute to road congestion, carry relatively few passengers and for which it is not practical to provide dedicated bus lanes on most Melbourne arterial roads.

Current major activity centres such as Chadstone and Doncaster Hill are simply unable to function as anything other than car-based centres. As such, these and similar areas should be de-emphasized as activity centres unless major public transport infrastructure is immediately committed to integrate these locations into the city rail network.

In some areas, such as Yarra, activity centres overlap or link up with each other to form continuous large areas. Even worse, all levels of activity centres now specify ‘use and development of land *in and around* activity centres’ - this effectively extends the spread of high density development outside centre boundaries without giving any guidance as to the degree to which this phrase “in and around” can be interpreted. This will lead to further uncertainty, and will further encourage more exploitative developers.

Urban Growth Boundary:

The Draft contains statements like:

.... “Any change to the urban growth boundary must only occur to reflect the needs demonstrated in the designated growth areas...., Protect the continued rural use of land within the urban growth boundary until conversion to urban use is required and the extension of urban services is approved as part of the sequencing of development.”

The statement also stresses the *approval* of the extension of urban services, not their provision. In other words, this remains a hands-off approach where developers are supposed to provide the infrastructure after the fact, instead of the state providing the infrastructure first in the areas within the UGB where it wants to encourage development that will allow the city to function better as an integrated whole with respect to provision of transport and services.

This is a land bank concept, not the ongoing protection of arable and rural land surrounding the city. These statements clearly indicate that any limits “set” for the UGB at any given time can be altered whenever a minister is pressured by the development industry to release more cheap peripheral land, or whenever it may be politically expedient.

The above approach is ad hocery, not planning. The most crucial function of the UGB in an era of drought, climate change and peak oil is to permanently limit the expansion of the city boundaries in order to make provision of adequate mass public transport infrastructure a reality for most residents right across the city.

Ian Wood

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2 February 2010*