

National Trust Suburbia Conference

URBAN CONSOLIDATION - SOUND POLICY OR FAD

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OUR OPTIONS

For this talk today on "urban consolidation - sound policy or fad" I wish to critically analyse this government policy.

We shall look at:

- The implications for Sydney of the application of urban consolidation
- State Government claims of its alleged benefits
- What the evidence shows

If our population has to increase we have two options. Either expand the city using proper planning for sustainability into carefully selected areas and preserve our open spaces, heritage and lifestyle. This expansion need only be very small as I shall show later. We could also repopulate selected depopulated rural areas.

Or squash us in closer together and inevitably destroy heritage and conservation areas, gardens and remnant bushland. The Government has chosen this latter path of increasing population density.

Visitors to Sydney from large centres overseas have commented on the beauty and relative spaciousness of the city. A policy of reducing this spaciousness by increasing population density needs to be very carefully examined to ensure that the result will not be detrimental.

Higher densities make substantial changes to the environment in which we live and the way we live. At worst, we must not be creating future urban slums. During past centuries societies have struggled to escape the appalling consequences of overcrowding.

PLANNING NSW MYTHS

What are the Government's stated reasons for its policies? The Minister of Planning and his Department say society will benefit from high density policies in these ways:

- Improved traffic conditions and air quality
- Saving of farmland and bushland
- Less pollution
- More housing choice
- Saving of cost
- Improve community networks

The question that we will look at today is - Will State Government policies really achieve these or are they just cloud cuckoo-land?

TRAFFIC AND AIR QUALITY

So let us look at the first claim. Planning NSW would have us believe that urban consolidation improves air quality and reduces greenhouse gas emissions. Most people are under the impression that as density increases so does traffic congestion. However the Minister and the Director-General maintain the opposite will occur.

Let us examine the facts.

This shows the *increasing congestion* resulting from a higher density of people. (refer endnote 1 - Roadway congestion index). From this graph of cities in the United States you can see that as persons per square mile increases, so does the roadway congestion index. (refer endnote 2 - Australian City Traffic Delay). I have looked at this relationship in Australian cities. The same trend is evident. The higher the density, the greater the congestion, just as we would expect.

More congestion in turn means greater energy consumption and more greenhouse gas emissions. Planning NSW claim urban consolidation has saved 320 million km travelled per year. I calculate that for the Sydney situation the claimed km saving in isolation is completely overshadowed by resulting additional energy usage (refer endnote 3 - Energy Balance). With a denser population you have to consider the additional vehicle stops and starts and idling resulting from the increased congestion. This alone is likely to cause nearly twice as much energy consumption as any possible gain. There is also the energy used to make the steel and cement needed for the new multi-unit buildings, amortised over a 50 year life. This is much more than for conventional housing materials and also bear in mind existing dwellings are torn down. There is also the additional air-conditioning energy the new units will need. On a conservative estimate in the Sydney situation, instead of saving energy, higher density causes Sydney to consume 2.58 PJ more each year.

This is borne out by actual air quality measurements. The greater the population density the worse the air quality as is shown on the graph (refer endnote 4 - Population Density and Air Quality).

Thus we are facing:

- A higher population density; resulting in
- More cars in an area; resulting in
- More congestion; resulting in
- More energy use; resulting in
- Deterioration in air quality

Where can one find a developed high-density city anywhere in the world with free-flowing traffic and good air quality? Large European cities held up to us by some as examples to emulate in fact experience severe congestion, in many the average vehicle speed is only 20 km per hour. This is so even if they have high density living, no freeways and intensive rail transit systems. Contrary to what we are led to believe, more than 90% of private travel in these cities is in cars and increasingly so. And in Sydney, in spite of the high density policies that we have suffered from over the last 10 years, traffic continues to get worse. (refer to endnote 5 - Sydney Transport Mode Use). Car use keeps on increasing more than the use of public transport. The

unfortunate reality in our situation is that with increasing densities, expanded use of public transport is at best minimal. Public transport use does not counteract more car use where more people live. Therefore more cars overall.

So much for the myth of improved air quality. The increased traffic congestion produces more pollution than any speculated saving. The higher the density, the worse the air we breathe.

SAVING FARMLAND AND BUSHLAND

Let us move on to another myth. In public addresses the Minister has said that a consolidated city saves significant farmland and bushland. He maintains that urban consolidation we have suffered in Sydney in the last 10 years has saved 8500 hectares of farmland and bushland. I mentioned earlier that this is a surprisingly minimal amount. Let me demonstrate.

A simple calculation shows that this area of 8500 hectares amounts to a mere average of 700 metres on Sydney's 40 km diameter, the length of a couple of suburban streets. This low figure surprises many people. It results from the fact that residential areas comprise only 40% of a city - the rest, such as the CBD, airports and industrial areas are unaffected by density. If anyone wishes to check this out, I have a handout available that shows how this number is arrived at.

As a proportion of our vast expanses of bush, 8500 hectares is infinitesimal. To put it into perspective, compare this 8500 hectares to the area of 1.5 million hectares of bush on farms that was cleared in the same period.

Remnant bushland pockets in the city are attractive to residents and visitors. They counteract pollution, purify the air, mitigate rainwater run-off, cool the city and provide a sanctuary for wildlife. These pockets are much more important to us than the effect of fringe farmland and bush moving another mere 700 metres average away from the city centre.

Let us look again at the illustration we saw earlier. We either expand the city by a very small extent in a sensitive manner. Or we squash everyone in closer together and destroy gardens and remnant bushland, heritage and conservation areas with a minimal saving in city dimensions.

So much for saving bushland.

OTHER FORMS OF POLLUTION

Time permits only a brief outline of the other myths. Higher densities result in increased noise levels. Increased densities with more concrete, tiles and bitumen result in less natural surface to absorb rain. This causes more polluted stormwater and more of it discharging into urban creeks and waterways causing significant degradation.

HOUSING CHOICE

Then there is the housing choice claim. Planning NSW is forcing uniformly higher densities onto every municipality. This reduces diversity if every municipality ultimately has to look the same. There is growing evidence that we are experiencing a surplus of units and an increasing shortage of affordable homes suitable for families.

Surely the highest priority should be given to families, children are the key to our future.

We are told that the government will save money by the more efficient use of infrastructure if more people are forced into existing suburbs. But all that high-density is achieving is the overloading of existing infrastructure and decreasing our quality of life. Untreated sewage is overflowing into creeks, as is the case in overbuilt Willoughby and this will need tens of millions of dollars to rectify. Roads are disintegrating. Municipalities all over Sydney are now having to spend billions of dollars extra to try to dig up and upgrade inadequate infrastructure. They have had to increase their rates. Hospitals cannot cope with the increased populations surrounding them. Neither can the police. The New South Wales government is not saving cost with urban consolidation, it is merely postponing essential expenditure. Our quality of life will plummet and the bill will ultimately amount to much more.

INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

The Minister of Planning tells us that high density enhances the involvement of people in community activities. (refer to endnote 6 - Involvement In Community Activities). The facts indicate the complete opposite. People's community involvement in more spacious small towns is twice that in dense large cities. Also, community involvement is greater in low density suburbs than in denser central cities. This is especially true for the larger centres. To me, all this substantiates the commonly held viewpoint that as density increases, peoples' involvement in community activities *declines*.

And as community involvement declines antisocial behaviour increases. Since the 1970s Sydney residents groups have been commenting on increasing mental health problems and suicide rates and the correlation with high-rise living as one factor, which they called "suicide towers".

Snap surveys performed by Save Our Suburbs in the Parramatta and Central Coast areas, show that the issue that *most worries* people is creeping overdevelopment. This was followed by infrastructure not coping with increased densities - traffic congestion, rising crime rates and overcrowded hospitals.

WHY?

In conclusion we must confront the question - why does the State Government have these high-density policies. All the available evidence shows them to be detrimental. Why cannot the beauty of Sydney's spaciousness be conserved and enhanced instead of being steadily destroyed? There seem to be three hidden underlying motives - unsaid drivers that lurk beneath the surface.

The first appears to be a naïve concept originating from Social Science academia. A school of thought which is misleadingly called "Post-Modernism" claims that any idea is as valid as any other. A superficially appealing fad such as an idealised high-density city is accepted without any rigorous analysis. Myths can be given preference to facts. This is not science.

Faddish thinking is not new. It reminds one of the story of King Canute commanding the tide to advance no further. Reality demolished the myth that the King was all-powerful. The Department of Planning New South Wales seems to be riddled with

absurd fads. The current unsubstantiated fad is that high population densities are good. We are constantly fed this nonsense.

The second covert policy driver is real enough - financial benefits. For many decades developers have made huge profits. Political parties have received a share of the profits via campaign donations. Those of us who have been around for long enough know that this practice is absolutely entrenched. It is difficult to see how objective decisions can be made under these circumstances.

The third hidden policy driver is short-term expediency. By cramming people in, politicians can temporarily avoid spending money on infrastructure such as communications, health and crime prevention.

Summarising, our investigations show a huge divergence between stated policy motives and the actual results. Instead of saving any significant bushland the authorities are destroying open space in the city; Instead of improving traffic they are increasing congestion; instead of improving air quality they are worsening air quality; they are not saving infrastructure cost, the overloaded infrastructure has to be enhanced; Instead of increasing housing choice there will be less housing choice; and instead of improved community networks there is a breakdown of communities. They are not looking after the future of our children.

There is also a huge difference between the reasons advanced for urban consolidation and the hidden underlying motives. Spruiking of postmodernist fads. Dependence on political donations from developers. Postponing essential spending.

With urban consolidation, heritage must disappear.

Heritage homes occupy lands the government wants for higher densities. If reality does not correspond with the current fad, then we must have the courage to say so. To shape our future urban environment we need genuine research and proper long-term planning. The planning must be done in consultation with local communities. We must work at enhancing the beauty of Sydney. Otherwise that beauty will be lost forever.

Tony Recsei

5 Crescent Close

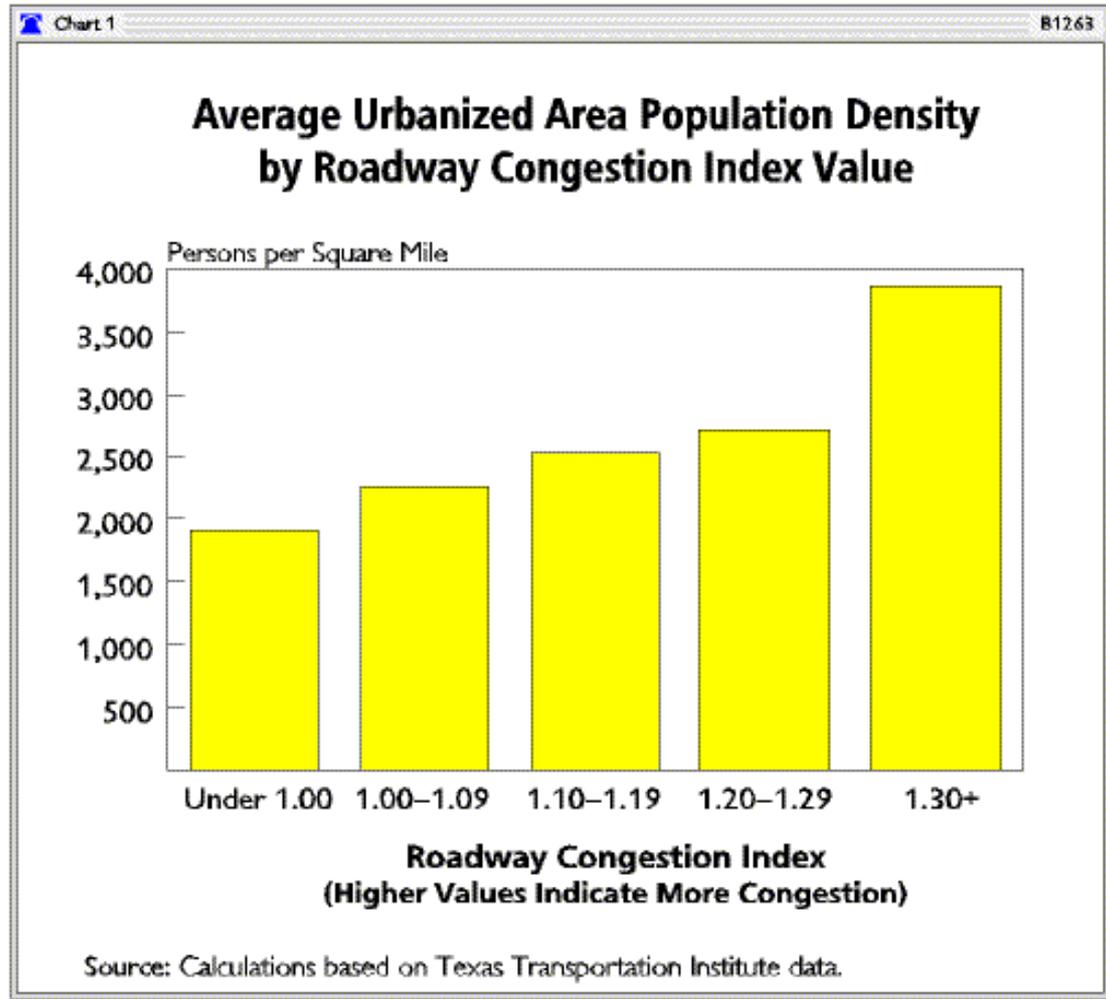
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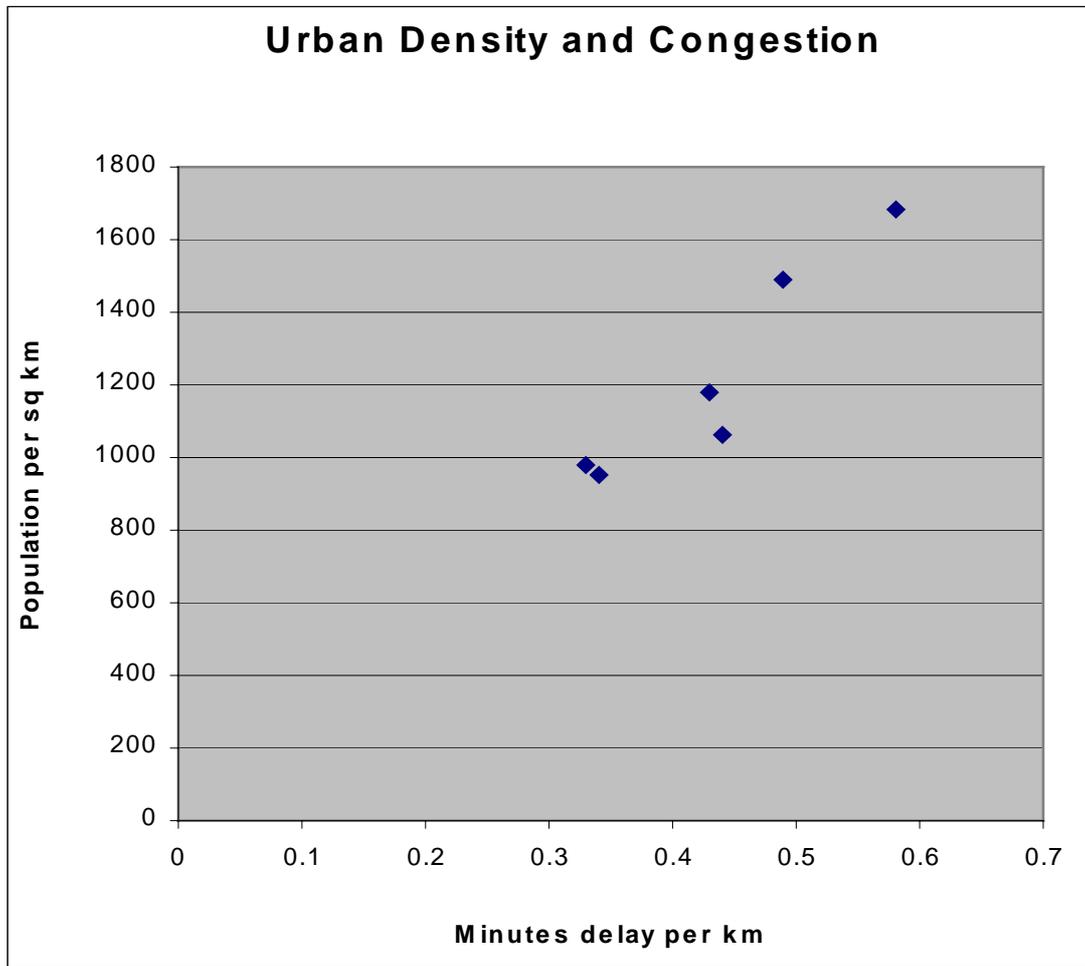
ENDNOTES

1. ROADWAY CONGESTION INDEX



Cox, W. 1999 The President's new sprawl initiative: A program in search of a problem. *The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder* No. 1263, March 18, 1999.

2. AUSTRALIAN TRAFFIC DELAY



From left to right: Brisbane, Canberra, Adelaide. Perth, Melbourne, Sydney

Delay from Road Facts, Ausroads, Sydney 2000, Density from Sustainability & Cities, Newman and Kenworthy, Island Press, Washington 1999

3. ENERGY BALANCE

Petajoules per annum saved.

Alleged Saving	1.85
Additional embodied energy	-1.08
Additional heating and cooling	-0.54
Result of additional congestion	-2.81

SOURCES:

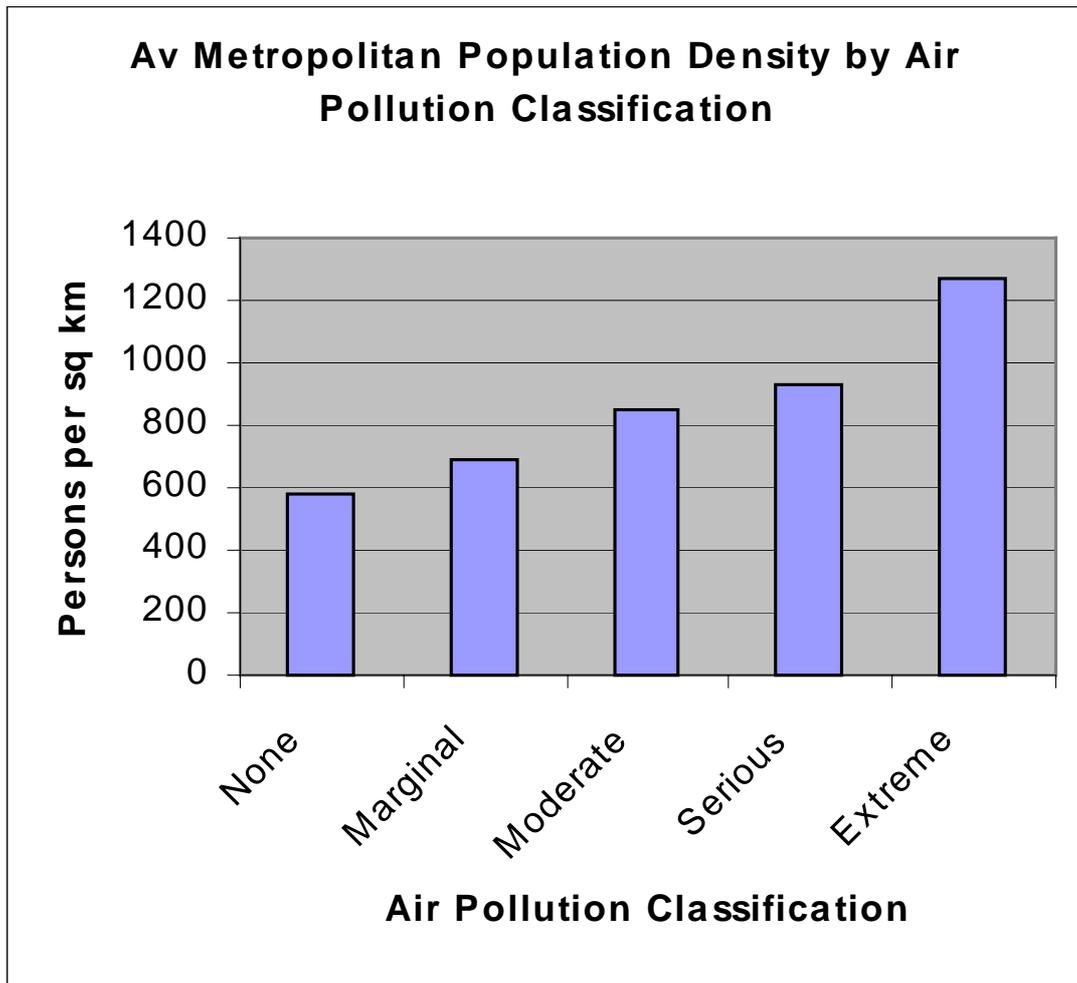
Personal correspondence - Dept of Urban Affairs and Planning (25 January 2001)

Newman and Kenworthy, *Sustainability and Cities*, (table 3.15), Island Press, Washington, 1999.

Personal communication - Bureau of Transport Economics, Canberra.

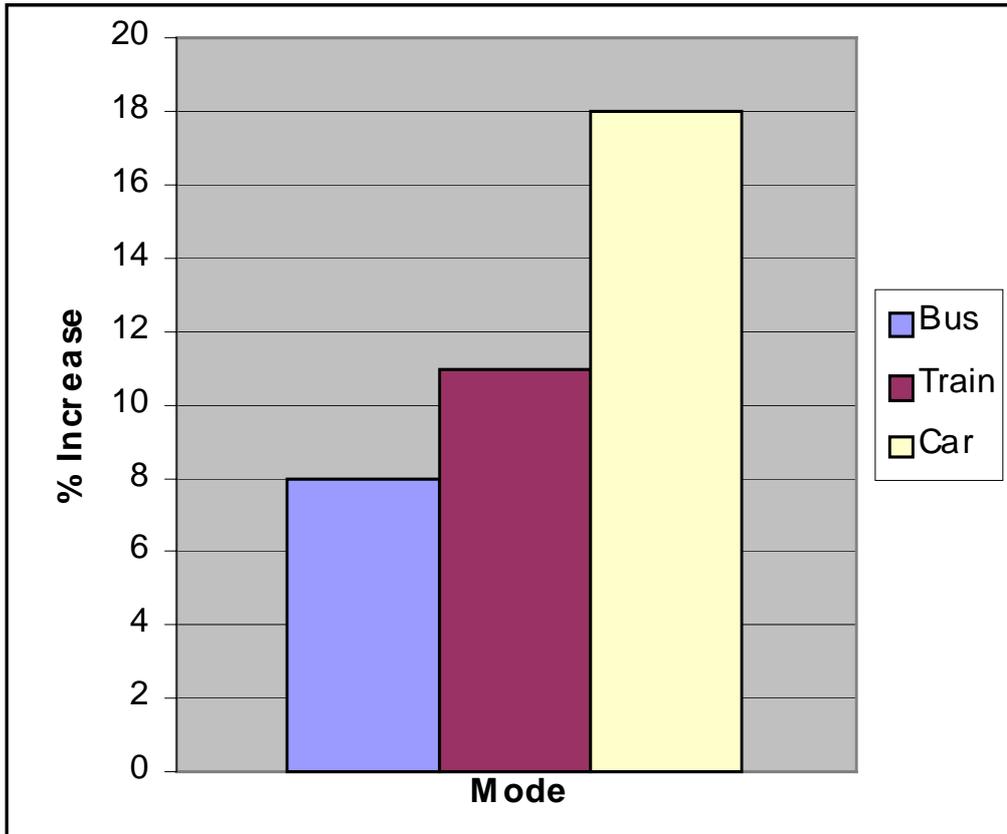
Troy P, *Rethinking our Cities*, Australian Financial Review, 23 March 2001

4. POPULATION DENSITY AND AIR QUALITY



Modified from: Randall O'Toole, "Dense Thinking", *Reason*, January 1999, based on US Environmental Protection Agency data No. 1263, March 18, 1999.

5. SYDNEY TRANSPORT MODE USE - 1991 TO 2000



Data from Sydney Morning Herald 16 July 2001 reporting on Department of Transport figures

6. INVOLVEMENT IN COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

Percentage of Community Involvement:

Central City and Suburb

Population	Central	Suburb
10,000 to 50,000	17.59638	16.91004673
50,000 to 250,000	15.76373	17.1728972
250,000 to 1 million	14.44217	15.99007009
1 million and over	8.192173	12.85776869

Data Source: Deduced from Putnam R D, *Bowling Alone*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000