

Copy of an open letter to S.A. State Parliamentarians, 12/09/2008 in response to the State Government's Planning Reform Proposals.
15/07/2010

from Stephen Fisher, President of "Save Our Suburbs - Adelaide" ,
Councillor and Alderman of the City of Mitcham from 1991 to November, 2010 ongoing,
Deputy Mayor 1997-2000.

12/09/2008 04:42

Dear Friends, Concerned Residents Groups of Adelaide, and I hope Concerned Parliamentarians,

The State Government's so-called Planning Reform Proposals, due to come into effect from March, 2009, is a blatant pandering to the self-interested Development Interests. The proposals do not come from Planning SA, but from a Victorian consultancy, at the behest of the development interests on the Economic Development Board.

These proposals strip out 90% of the current rules, as set out in each Council's "Development Plan", and also the over-arching State Development Plans.

It is a proposal for "OPEN SLATHER. The NO RULES set of rules" for Planning in South Australia, and will encourage the destruction / demolition and easy sub-division of over three quarters of Adelaide's blocks land, many of which contain Adelaide's lovelier old houses, to the benefit only of the developers. Such destruction will be Mike Rann's legacy. I find it hard to believe that he has not taken notice of the fate of Jeff Kennet, who was thrown unceremoniously out of his office of Premier of Victoria, shortly after introducing similar "open slather" planning rights in that state in the late 1990's. Mike Rann deserves to suffer the same electoral defeat if he does not remedy these awful anti-community proposals.

AFFORDABILITY

Permitting easy rules to allow sub-division does NOT REDUCE the costs of dwellings. Instead, allowing easy sub-division pushes up the prices of older, run-down dwellings, making them unaffordable to first home buyers. As a Councillor for the City of Mitcham since 1991, I have observed builders outbidding 1st home buyers for perfectly liveable dwellings, intending to sub-divide and reap the maximum profit. They are able to pay much higher prices than first home buyers, and actually "push-up" the going prices in the area. They can afford to do this BECAUSE weak planning rules which permit sub-division allows them to build two (or three) new dwellings, and sell each of them for 30% - 40% higher than the price of the original house. **THE DEVELOPERS CONTINUE CLAIMING THAT SMALLER ALLOTMENTS BRING DOWN THE COST OF DWELLINGS, DESPITE 30 YEARS OF EVIDENCE TO THE CONTRARY(see the Demographia website, below).**

DEMOGRAPHIA, 4th Annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey

I urge all of you to print this paper, and read it over the weekend.

[4th Annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey](#)

[SMART GROWTH & URBAN CONSOLIDATION: THE HIGH SOCIAL & ECONOMIC COSTS](#)

[227 Markets in Australia . Canada . Ireland . New Zealand . United Kingdom . United States](#)

Former Reserve Bank of New Zealand Governor Donald Brash writes in the introduction to this *4th Annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey* that "the affordability of housing is overwhelmingly a function of just one thing, the extent to which governments place artificial restrictions

on the supply of residential land." This report describes the economic consensus that "smart growth"/ "urban consolidation" have destroyed housing affordability in many urban areas. The scarcity produced by smart growth and urban consolidation markets has serious social and economic consequences. The resulting asset bubble has interfered with economic policies of central banks, as in the US and New Zealand. Yet, in responsive markets, housing affordability remains robust, including the three fastest growing large markets in the high income world, **Atlanta, Houston and Dallas-Fort Worth** and in other Canadian (such as **Ottawa**) & US markets.

The detailed analysis on 227 world-wide "developed western city" comparative housing costs, published on the website of the research group, Demographia, <http://www.demographia.com/> is an outstanding example of how pushing for "urban consolidation" actually pushes prices up. Too many parliamentarians, of all political parties, have accepted at face value the outdated and falsified 1980's arguments of a group of "expert planners", the promoters of "urban consolidation," who see their role in life as facilitating the interests of the most rapacious of the development industry. Many builders, such as Bob Day, and real estate agents, recognise that the destruction of the quality of Adelaide's streetscapes only diminishes our quality of life. The maintenance of the low density of dwellings, the high quality of open front gardens, most of which have 8-10 metre front setbacks, (the "setback" is the distance from the front boundary fence to the front of the dwelling), is critical to that amenity and quality.

I urge you to read the accompanying attachments, and review the Mitcham Council's Planners' report on the total inadequacy of the proposals.

Save Our Suburbs - Adelaide is supportive of good quality re-development, but not at the expense of quality existing homes are suitable for restoration and/or extensions, as this is energy inefficient and environmentally unsustainable.

Our organisation is not "anti-development", but encourages any development which maintains or improves the existing amenity, and which complies with the Local Council's Development Plan. This means that replacement dwellings, which *are* appropriate when the existing house is not economical to restore, **MUST** be complimentary to the street, reflect similarity of styles and maintain similar block size, open space to built ratio and materials of construction. We strongly oppose intrusive, poor quality development which downgrades the locality, such as ugly "all garage door frontages", lack of eaves, open space for children's play or space for essential shade trees. We oppose the trend for dwellings to be parapet wall fronted, which creates a "prison architecture" style, and there should be some controls on heavily painted render in garish purples etc.

The rules of planning could be so simply expressed, for fully built suburbs.

Rules in Blue, comments in Black Text.

1. **Nothing should be approved unless it improves, and at least maintains, the amenity and streetscape of the vicinity.**
2. **Maintaining the existing front boundary setbacks to the dwelling frontage, maintaining the traditional 30% to 40% maximum site coverage, with driveway access to the rear yard, and private open space backyards of 200-300m² is essential to the continued existence of "child-friendly" housing.** This type of house, common in the inner and middle suburbs, and sitting on allotments of 650m² to 750m² in suburbs built from 1920 to 1980, so obviously sought after by young families that the price of such dwellings, even if they are run-down, has continued to rise at rates far higher than newer townhouse and semi-detached dwellings which have been intrusively inserted into these suburbs. These smaller allotment dwellings provide "doll's house" amenities on "matchbox-sized" blocks, with only tiny outdoor courtyards for entertaining and children's play. The great majority of these

buildings are cheaply constructed, and after their first "newness value" recedes, they become the unwanted dwellings with significantly lower rates-of rise in values. Leading Adelaide academic geographers and demographers have presented papers at planning conferences in Adelaide which demonstrate that over 80% of the population in Adelaide and Australia desire to live in detached dwellings.

35 years of the development industry telling us all that "you want to live in a medium density, 3-6 storey unit, to be able to enjoy the lifestyle of meeting at the local coffee shop" has not altered the desired living environment of Australians. We like our suburban lives, and coffee under the back verandah, or around our kitchen table, is not only less expensive, but we can actually listen to each other's conversation.

3. Every owner who buys in a fully built suburb, has the right to expect that the qualities of that suburban environment will be maintained, by the planning authority.

4. Every suburb has its own character, and the maintenance of that character is best kept under the control of the local community through well-written rules, administered by their Local Council. The proposals in the "weasel word" "Better Planning Better Future" are a "one-size-fits-all" concept, which is only in the interests of the developers who wish to squeeze the maximum profit from each block. The destruction of Adelaide would be the result if they are passed by Parliament.

5. The existing owners' / neighbours' rights should be given a higher weighting than transient "blow-in, blow-out" developers who are seeking only the maximum profit.

Many heritage and character builders and architects, who often live in the suburbs where they carry out most of their work, perform excellent additions, renovations and completely new replacement dwellings where that is most reasonable, and their work is uniformly admired and approved of by their neighbours. Pauline Hurren is probably the best known of such architects in Adelaide.

6. These rules (plans) are to ensure that only complimentary development occurs within this precinct.

WHY IS URBAN CONSOLIDATION THEORY WRONG-HEADED.

Many theorists of economics, and planning, seek a denser, high-rise concentrated form of building, with claims that their aim is to improve the economics of public transport, and a concept of everyone walking, cycling or taking public transport for 90% of their required journeys. Save Our Suburbs believes that these theorists should build a "trial city" of this type, and see how many residents seek to live there. These theorists want to "fit the population to the city", rather than fit the city to the desires of the population.

Much of the following quotations are taken from a paper written by Peter Johnson, with assistance from Stephen Fisher, which Peter presented at a major RAPI Conference held at the Hilton Hotel around late 1991, the full text of which is attached. Peter was invited to give a "Resident's View of Urban Consolidation," because he was then the President of the Westbourne Park Residents' Association.

Peter later served as a Councillor for Gault Ward, on Mitcham Council from 1995-2000. Given that it was written in 1991, it is frightening that it was so prescient with regard to successive State Governments' (from both major parties) continued adherence to the policies of Urban Consolidation which were already discredited by the evidence from the studies quoted below, and despite the strong evidence in the Planning S.A. Department's own (largely secret) studies that it was singularly disliked by the community. At the most recent PIA conference on increased density, an additional paper was given by an Adelaide University Geography academic which showed that in 2008, over 80% of the population wished to live in **single storey detached dwelling in its own garden**. This figure is in

remarkable concordance with the objective evidence presented in Peter Johnson's Paper. The Paper also canvassed likely future problems from lack of water available during drought years from the River Murray, due to the construction of an increasing number of dams and interceptions upstream in the eastern states.

1. **Dr Michael Lennon, Director of the 1990 S.A.Planning Review**, summed up the community's attitude on ABC's Lateline programme "The End of the 1/4 acre block", where he said:

"Everyone seems to support urban consolidation except perhaps the vast majority of the Australian public."

"We've got to be careful in my view not to see Urban Consolidation as just another panacea, the latest snake oil that's going to fix everything. the truth is, as planners, as public officials we need to be avoid the intellectual arrogance that assumes that we know better than everyone else, that somehow life in the suburbs is dreadful."

" We need to ask the people of Australia whether in fact they like the suburbs. The truth is we planned them (the suburbs *my addition*) because the standards of housing, the kinds of areas that we created were what people wanted. If we want to turn over 150 years of culture in Australia, we are facing up to a very big task and I am not confident that we will succeed. That is not to say that we can't do big things in urban consolidation, but we are not going to contain the cities, and we are not going to turn upside down the legitimate aspirations of the Australian people."

2. **The Victorian Department of Planning and Urban Growth** commissioned a detailed study on Medium Density Housing (by Tract Consultants; Swinburne Centre for Urban & Social Research; & Sarkissian Associates). The final report of October,1990 states in the Executive summary:

"There is a high preference (somewhere between 75% and 90% amongst Australian housing consumers for a detached house"

"Additionally, this preference often manifests itself as resident reaction against the introduction of medium density housing in existing neighbourhoods".

3. **The S.A. Planning Review** commissioned a report, dated **October,1990, titled "Housing and Location Preferences and the Quality of Life in Community Environments"** by Dr Christine Stevens and Professor Riaz Hassan, [ARC Australian Professorial Fellow and Emeritus, Professor, Flinders University, South Australia].

It provides detail on the actual "real-life" desires of Australians in their housing choice, but because it did not accord with the "accepted wisdom" of the day, it was not released for publication. This lack of publication is scandalous! The copy of the report in our possession has a large "LIMITED CIRCULATION" embargo on the first page, and the larger disclaimer on the second page states:

"THE OPINIONS CONTAINED IN THIS REPORT DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THOSE OF THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT NOR THE PLANNING REVIEW"

Quotes from this document: "Housing and Location Preferences and the Quality of Life in Community Environments"

Page 3: **"The house type most preferred was the single storey detached dwelling in its own garden irrespective of age,sex, marital status, household type, ethnicity and income. The advantages of this house type were that it was**

considered to be more private, spacious and varied than other housing forms."

Page 15: "It has been found that generally most elderly people do not regard occupation of housing which may be too large for their current needs as a problem, **although planners may do so.**"

Page 23: It could be suggested most people prefer / occupy detached housing on quarter acre blocks because

[a] this is the dominant housing form available,

[b] people want what the majority have, not wishing to be different from others,

[c] this is the only form of housing most people have experienced, therefore their preferences are shaped by that experience,

[d] **such housing is seen as intrinsically more valuable than medium density forms or flats,**

[e] **that value is seen as an important means of providing economic security in old age,**

[f] **it provides a means of occupying spare time which may be difficult to fill in smaller accommodation."**

Page 39: "Single parents generally wanted the same house type as nuclear families with children, as their need for indoor and outdoor space was no different from that of traditional families."

Page 40: "Many elderly home owners, (couples and single people), had three bedrooms, but were not perturbed by occupying a large dwelling. The extra rooms were said to be used for their hobbies, or housed grandchildren and friends on occasions."

Page 64: **"The difficulty for many people who were ready to prescribe urban consolidation as the preferred form of future development, was that this support was largely theoretical. They themselves did not want to relinquish any of their own private outdoor space. neither did they necessarily want change to occur in their own suburb."**

Page 65: "The dilemma for the majority of those who considered urban consolidation necessary in the future was that they themselves preferred to live in single storey detached housing of low densities."

4. Quotes from Peter Hall, a consultant to the 1991 Planning review, quoted from the May / June, 1991 issue of S.A. Planner, are also highly relevant:

" Adelaideans are attracted to their one-eighth acre (500m²) or quarter acre (1,000m²) plots. This has given them a remarkably even, homogeneous, egalitarian kind of society. It's something that other parts of the world would, (and should), envy."

"Consolidation can mean slummification, or the creation of instant slums."

5. Books by noted Australian planning and humanitarian thinkers such as Professor Patrick Troy, and Hugh Stretton have demolished the arguments in favour of Urban Consolidation, and defended the essence of Australians love for their suburbs and their suburban dwellings, on blocks which have room for gardens, play and barbecues and workshops.

Conclusion.

If these proposals pass through Parliament without extensive improvements, Adelaide's amenity will be trashed!

Do you want your street and your electors' streets to be damaged by short sighted, self-interested developers?

http://www.mitchamcouncil.sa.gov.au/webdata/resources/files/SUBMISSION_BY_THE_CITY_OF_MITCHAM_ON_THE_PLANNING_REFORMS_2008.pdf

Best regards,



Stephen Fisher,
President, Save Our Suburbs-Adelaide.
Ph: (08) 8277-3288 (Int): +61-8-8277-3288
Fax: (08) 8276-4024 (Int): +61-8-8276-4024
E-mail: stevef@kdfisher.com.au

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