

## **Power and Politics in Local Planning: Keeping the Local in the Global City**

**Address by Cr Genia McCaffery, Mayor of North Sydney and President of the Local Government Association of NSW**

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Thank you for inviting me to speak to you as part of the Sydney Futures Twilight Symposia series.

I congratulate UTS and the Design, Architecture and Building, and Humanities and Social Sciences faculties for organising this series of talks, and also the sponsors and partners whose assistance has made the series possible.

It's refreshing to be speaking on the subject of the future of Sydney in an environment such as the University of Technology.

So much of the debate about the future of Sydney is ill or under informed, and takes place in forums and theatres which exacerbate the information vacuum rather than fill it.

Unfortunately, this includes much of the debate which takes place in Parliament, through the media with some notable exceptions – the Sydney Morning Herald is to be congratulated for its comprehensive analysis of Sydney's future directions – and even, dare I say it, in councils at times.

Much of the debate is laced with hyperbole, dire predictions and truisms.

It is a debate about declaring positions, drawing bottom lines, and labelling friends and foes.

It should be about engaging us in an exchange of information, understanding the costs and benefits - especially who pays and who benefits – and agreeing on outcomes and a way to get where we want to go.

It should be about simply asking "Is Sydney a place where we want to live."

But the debate always seems to be reduced to them and us.

Developers versus residents.

Greenies versus brownies.

Easties versus westies.

Professionals versus the masses.

Often it seems that only by first joining a camp can we participate and understand who we are and what we want.

It reminds me of John Cleese as the French knight on the battlements hurling abuse and farm animals at the English.

Very entertaining, but no substitute for informed debate.

If these symposia are to have one particular benefit for the people of Sydney, then let us be able to say that we added to the public debate, and the store of information and points of view available to the community.

Let us be able to say we broke down a few of the unhelpful tribal identities within the debate and looked at Sydney's future in a positive and inclusive way.

Which leads me to a slightly cautionary note, and one which as a politician I am as guilty of transgressing as any one, I am sure.

I mentioned the tendency for the debate about Sydney's future to be laced with hyperbole.

It's all about crisis, invasion, destruction, soullessness, profit.

Even the flyer we received about this symposium talks about Sydney sliding into chaos; unhealthy, dangerous, expensive and inequitable.

I will excuse UTS on the grounds that those words are all about making sure we have an audience.

"Come and hear Genia McCaffery talk about consensus, engagement, order, and affordable housing," probably doesn't cut the mustard as a drawcard.

But we mustn't forget that it is the positives we need to accentuate, the opportunities, the recognition of Sydney's potential, the things we can do together to make Sydney an even better place.

So if I can summarise all that into a single theme with which we might agree to go forward, let it be that we examined Sydney's future from viewpoint "Do we want to live here?"

Having made my appeal to you that there is common ground to be found in this debate, let me say that I speak to you wearing two hats.

I have been Mayor of North Sydney since 1995.

This means I have a local constituency and the privilege of representing the residents of North Sydney in their endeavours to ensure North Sydney is a place they want to live.

And since 2004 I have been the President of the Local Government Association of New South Wales.

So I also have a wider constituency, the 73 councils across the state – metropolitan, coastal and country – which are members of the Local Government Association, and whose interests and by extension, whose residents' interests, I and my elected Executive at the Association also represent.

The greatest challenge I have, whichever hat I am wearing – Mayor of North Sydney or President of the LGA – is ensuring that whatever we do in Local Government genuinely represents our communities' informed wishes about where we want to go.

Community representatives are only credible, and indeed, only get re-elected, if they gain and maintain community support.

Gaining community support is not merely asking them what they want and setting off towards it.

It is about leadership and ideas and options, assurances and delivery.

And perhaps most of all it is about transparency and accountability.

That is why we in Local Government can speak with such certainty and with such suasion on behalf of the community.

Because when we go to the ballot box to have our performance assessed, the community delivers a verdict on how well they were engaged at a local level.

Not by big issues like the balance of payments or global security or the clash of cultures.

But on whether we made our community a better place to live.

This is the lesson of determining Sydney's future.

If it is to be successful it has to deliver what the community want.

It has to make Sydney a better place to live.

This is the antithesis of the 'them and us' approach to such big decisions that only Local Government can deliver.

Only Local Government can engage the community at the level at which we can all truly make an informed judgement about what we want and whether we have achieved it.

So let's examine the future of Sydney and the mechanisms being offered to deliver it, on the basis of performance against this criterion – will Sydney become a place where we want to live?

Let me compare and contrast the way we have managed questions about the future of Sydney and whether we have focussed on the community, on engaging local people at the local level, the only level at which we can truly answer questions about what we want and how we want to get there.

Forgive me for starting with a North Sydney example.

It will be no surprise to you that when we at North Sydney Council developed our new Local Environment Plan (LEP), North Sydney LEP 2000, we did so based on extensive community consultation.

We began by developing an area character study for nine areas within the North Sydney council area.

As you know North Sydney is not large, only 11 square kilometres.

But in order to be satisfied that we were engaging the community at the right level, we divided those 11 square kilometres into nine study areas.

The community was invited to a workshop for their study area, held at a local venue.

Up to 200 people attended some of the area workshops.

At these first workshops we asked the community what they wanted to see for their area.

We talked about where growth should go, what areas needed protecting, what people perceived as threats to their area, what the benefits of growth would be as well as what they liked about their area and wanted us to protect in a broad sense.

We then developed nine area character statements and took the statements back to nine more workshops and asked people to review them.

The advantage of this was that people could see how we had used their original comments and if we hadn't done as they had wanted, we were able to talk about how and why we had made a particular recommendation.

We then redrafted the area character statements and used them as a first base for the draft LEP and Development Control Plan (DCP).

We then ran three workshops at larger venues to explain the LEP and ask people for feedback.

Between 200 and 300 people attended each of these workshops.

We then took the feedback from this workshop and revised the LEP, then held one more workshop to talk to people about what we had done and why.

We promoted all these workshops through our precinct meetings and in ads in the local paper.

We also produced four newsletters, which were letterboxed to all residents and posted to all non-resident ratepayers.

These newsletters told people what we were doing, explained some of the jargon associated with planning and advised them of meeting dates and venues.

The feedback from this process was very positive.

Because we had consulted on the area character statements there were no surprises when the draft LEP came out and although we made revisions from the four LEP workshops, we didn't have any community outrage because everybody already knew what the big picture would be.

The key to our success in North Sydney was asking people what they wanted and then showing them what we had done.

The process was transparent, interactive, understandable and most of all, asked the community at the local level 'what kind of place do you want to live in?'

Many of you, especially the professionals may be wondering why I took you through such a simple process in such great detail.

I did so to remind us all exactly how simple it is.

Organising workshops and newsletters and managing consultation with residents is complex, of course.

It is certainly resource intensive.

But it has one simple aim which we must never forget when we are dealing with the complexities of planning.

The only reason to do it at all is to engage the community in answering the question I keep asking 'what kind of place do you want to live in?'

A process like this is essential to the success of any planning strategy.

There are countless examples of local planning exercises like the North Sydney LEP.

And I can say with certainty that there are no examples of local planning exercises like this conducted by agencies other than local councils – especially not the State Government – simply because it is only local councils that have the necessary connection with the community to deliver local planning at the local level.

We only have to consider the alternatives to community engagement to prove my point.

And by going no further than to the Carlton United Brewery (CUB) site across the road from where we meet tonight.

The State Government's decision to take control of the CUB site, and what we can expect from their subsequent management of the planning process, contains none of the elements required to answer my question.

The State Government's process will answer questions like how many units can be fitted on the site, what height can be achieved, how many car spaces are required, and so on.

But these questions will all be answered by the application of mathematical formulae, by planning in the absence of people.

Because no one who lives near the CUB site or who will ever live on the site will ever be asked 'what kind of place do you want to live in?'

It reminds me of that infamous episode of 'Yes Minister' where Sir Humphrey argued for the efficiencies of a hospital that was fully staffed and equipped, but had no patients.

Comedy aside, this is the essence of centralised planning - planning for buildings and not for people.

What makes the CUB site even more illustrative is the fact that the State Government has already nobbled local planning in the City of Sydney.

The State Government has already established the Central Sydney Planning Committee, on which the council has only minority representation, to consider major developments in the City.

It is a process with some Local Government input, but it is not controlled by Local Government and is not answerable to the people who live in the areas being planned for.

Of course, the State Government argues that planning in Central Sydney is too important to leave up to the locals.

Sydney is a global city, they say.

It needs to be planned in order to meet global concerns and priorities.

The needs of the locals are somehow dismissed as irrelevant or as barriers to achieving these global ends.

What this thesis neglects to consider is that most of the people who live in an area, whether it be the centre of Sydney or the suburbs or the bush, live there because they like it.

They choose to live there.

They are committed to their area and to making it a better place to live.

And what more successful example of community engagement and citizen commitment is there in New South Wales than the City of Sydney?

Lord Mayor Clover Moore and her team are genuinely seeking community engagement and consultation in their decisions.

Under Councillor Moore's leadership, the City of Sydney has become a place which people are enthused about, proud of, and engaged in debating its future.

People choose to live in the City because of the hustle and bustle, the proximity, the 24 hour a day living.

They come forward to participate and debate and work together.

They are ready, willing and able to make the right decisions about their neighbourhoods.

But does the State Government use this vital and informed resource to help plan sites like CUB?

It shies away from engagement and accountability and sends the plans off to a committee to decide.

And even worse, it sends the plans off to a new committee rather than the committee it originally set up to second guess the community.

If CUB proves anything at all, it is how unwise the State Government was in the first place to remove the City of Sydney's planning powers for major developments.

Now it is even bypassing its own Central Sydney Planning Committee for another committee.

Yet this is the model the State Government imposed on us through its so called planning reforms earlier this year.

Some of you may recall our rally outside Parliament House in March when the changes to the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act were being debated.

The Planning Minister promised us changes to the planning system which would produce certainty and efficiency.

He gave us changes which allow him to remove the planning powers of councils which he assesses as under performing according to performance criteria which he determines.

The work of democratically elected and accountable councillors will be done by ministerially appointed panels.

It might be efficient.

But it is a system which provides no transparency and accountability.

And where is the community in the State Government's process?

It guarantees that they are left out.

And where are the State Government's reforms after a major test like the CUB site?

The Minister intervened to overturn his own model, the model which would provide certainty and efficiency.

He replaced one appointed panel with another, appointed by and reporting to him.

And in a situation where no council and no community in New South Wales was better placed and better informed to do the job his model has failed to do.

Local Government will make the repeal of these changes to the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act central in our discussions with candidates for the 2007 State election.

The State Government's enthusiasm for centralisation is now threatening to subvert its own Sydney Metropolitan Strategy.

The release of the Strategy in late 2005 was a milestone in metropolitan planning.

Here was a process which integrated all aspects of planning for a Sydney where people want to live.

The Strategy had as its first aim to enhance liveability.

It committed us to delivering fairness in the provision of services and access to opportunities, so different to the adversarial approach I mentioned earlier.

It brought together plans not just for housing, but for employment, transport, and environmental sustainability.

It recognised a hierarchy of planning – local, regional, state, global – and that getting each part right was integral to the success of the whole.

Most importantly, it was to be delivered in partnership with Local Government by a State Department with clout.

The Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources would be able to take the lead in integrating the activities of other state agencies, including Treasury, in order to achieve the plan's outcomes.

Local Government welcomed the Strategy.

We recognised that instead of just a housing plan, we now had an historic opportunity to develop a real strategy which not only recognised the role of Local Government, but relied on Local Government to deliver what only it can deliver, that is informed community consent.

Local Government came to the table enthused by the prospects of what could be achieved by the Metro Strategy, but also in the knowledge that failure to deliver meant that this time we couldn't simply blame the State Government.

This time our money was where our mouths were.

Our role was to translate the Strategy into local and regional impacts, engage the community in the debate, and negotiate for their agreement.

But our greatest challenge was going to be securing for our communities the provision of guaranteed infrastructure and services in return for their agreement to the changes envisaged by the Strategy.

The breadth of vision in the Strategy, the integration of all aspects of planning for Sydney under the banner of liveability, delivered in partnership with a Department with clout, gave us real hope that this time a metropolitan plan could deliver where others had failed.

Where are we today?

Most importantly, the Department with clout is no more.

The integration of metropolitan planning and delivery of outcomes under the management of a single state agency has been overturned.

We now have back the old arrangements where the Department of Planning owns a plan for compliance with which it has to negotiate with the other agencies – water, roads, conservation – all of which have their own agendas.

And worst of all, the Department of Planning is in the same queue outside the Treasurer's door as the rest of us.

It will be the financial arm of State Government which determines what infrastructure can be delivered and when.

The Department of Planning has informed us that the State Infrastructure Strategy, released by the Office of Financial Management in the NSW Treasury has about a 70% compliance with the Metro Strategy.

Only 70%.

Why not 100%?

Didn't the state agencies sit down and work on the Metro Strategy together?

I suppose we should be grateful that there's any compliance at all.

On a slightly positive note, at least when you look up the website for the State Infrastructure Strategy there is a link right at the bottom to the Metro Strategy.

It was too good to last.

And now even the orderly release of housing land is under threat.

What more essential element is there to planning than orderly land release?

It ensures that neighbourhoods can be planned and released based on the sensible and affordable provision of essential infrastructure.

And even more importantly, it ensures that the provision of essential infrastructure occurs when it is required, and not years after the event and at the expense of later generations, long after the land developers have fled with the profits.

Local Government is not even represented on the State Government's Precinct Acceleration Control Group – there is an Orwellian title for you – nor are council infrastructure and servicing requirements mentioned in the Government's Precinct Acceleration Protocol.

The abandonment of a staged approach to land release strikes at the heart of planning as a discipline and the Metro Strategy as a plan.

Ad hoc development will fatally undermine the provision of essential infrastructure in new release areas, which require a critical mass to succeed.

It seems that liveability loses out to the bean counters again.

But we're not giving up.

We are continuing to work with the Department of Planning to deliver the Metro Strategy.

Unfortunately it is hard to describe this process as a whole of government partnership, but the work needs to be done.

Our communities expect their local representatives to make major planning decisions, so we will make them.

And what will we get in the future?

Cookie cutter suburbs?

I am more optimistic than that.

We have learned enough from the mistakes of laissez faire planning and development control in the 70s and 80s for the community not to be fooled again.

We will get what we plan for.

That is really such a simple statement that it needs to be said and understood.

Planning is aspirational.

It is about what we want, not just what we think we are going to get.

Whatever temporary hiccups we have with the Metro Strategy and the so called planning reforms, Local Government will continue to advocate on behalf of the communities it represents.

Sometimes this advocacy will occur through the way Local Government operates within the planning system.

At other times, when the system precludes an appropriate role for Local Government, such as CUB-type arrangements, we and our communities will be more political.

One way or another, however, it is Local Government's obligation to make sure that our community voices are heard, that their choices are not diminished.

There are three important goals we must work towards.

The reintegration of the planning system is one.

Integrated planning in the guise of the Metro Strategy and the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources didn't fail.

It wasn't even tried.

It was a failure of vision and courage, not partnership and delivery.

Secondly, we must secure federal involvement in urban planning.

The lack of interest by the Federal Government in the well being of urban dwellers is an extraordinary oversight.

There are few countries in the developed or the developing world where citizens accept such a situation.

And as the imbalance between the Federal and State Governments in financial management and control worsens, the consequences of the lack of federal involvement in urban affairs will become starker.

One could be forgiven for thinking that the Federal Treasurer's comments this week about federalism are merely about brand differentiation in the struggle to lead the federal Liberal Party.

Our challenge is to make sure that the debate over federalism has practical and positive outcomes.

Securing Federal involvement in our cities is critical.

Thirdly, we need to recognise and enhance the role of Local Government.

You may be aware of the recent Report into the Financial Sustainability of Local Government, commissioned by the Local Government and Shires Associations.

This milestone report has set the ball rolling on discussion not just about financial sustainability, but the role of Local Government in our complex structure of government.

This year the three levels of government signed an agreement which prescribes how they will consult with each other to determine the appropriate level at which services will be provided and funded.

An agreement like this between Local Government and the New South Wales Government is required so that we can agree on our respective roles and responsibilities and avoid the poaching and name calling which prompts unnecessary interventions like the State Government's changes to planning laws earlier this year.

Our polling shows that the community trust Local Government to represent them and to make decisions on their behalf.

The State Government has much to gain by building on this community expectation and goodwill, and cementing a partnership with Local Government on planning and other matters.

I am optimistic about the future of Sydney because I have confidence that people know what they want and will make demands on their representatives to deliver.

Community control in planning is not a recipe for conservatism and no change.

I defy anyone to say that North Sydney and indeed, most other communities in Sydney and New South Wales, are not dynamic.

Communities can accept change and indeed, welcome change, just as new technologies are accepted because of the lifestyle advantages they offer.

Of course, changes to our neighbourhoods can be frightening, but they also offer great advantages which communities, when properly informed and engaged in the planning process, will not only accept, but be enthused about.

The community simply want to be assured that change will be managed with their consent and in ways which enhance their lives, not make them more difficult.

Let me close with a word to planning professionals.

I talked earlier about our adversarial system.

Them and us.

This approach has never produced good outcomes.

It will not do so now or in the future.

The most important thing to remember is that the community is not the enemy.

The community is in the driving seat.

Just as Local and State Governments have to acknowledge that it is our job to engage the community, so it is the job of professionals.

The skills of planners and architects are essential in order to secure the best outcomes.

If all we think we are doing is holding the line against the invading hordes, then we have already lost.

We'll be back on those battlements with John Cleese hurling cows, sheep and abuse at the invading hordes, our communities.

The common good, which many professionals think they are protecting, is just that, our common good.

Professionals are essential to identify and describe it, to translate it into plans and ideas with which to engage the community, who own it.

The challenge to professionals is the same as that to councillors; to describe, to elucidate, to lead, to inspire.

And in the end, the community will decide whether professionals have succeeded, maybe not as brutally as they pass judgement at the ballot box on councillors, but essentially in the same way.

I've made an appeal to you tonight as a councillor and a community representative.

An appeal to work together with the community in order to answer one question.

I have left the presentation of numbers and details to my professional colleagues presenting to you tonight.

I have concentrated on ideas, on a philosophy which explains to me why the only question we need to ask of ourselves and our neighbours about the future of Sydney is "Do we want to live here?"

There will be a Sydney in the future whether we plan or not.

Whether there is community support or not.

And it will be a global city.

But whether it will be one in which we want to live or just one in which we have to, is our challenge.