

3 November 2017

Submission into the Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program

I fully support the need for renewal of public housing and the provision of additional housing.

However, the proposal put forward by the Department seems ill thought-out and has many issues that concern me, in particular as they relate to the Abbotsford St, North Melbourne proposal.

- the adequacy of a proposed 10% increase in public housing (or 1,100 public units) on the sites given the size of the waiting list for public housing

The selling of public land to private developers is totally inappropriate and inexcusable. This is a public asset owned by the community for the purpose of providing public housing. Once the land is gone, it is gone for ever. The logic being used to justify this approach is specious. The State Government is in the middle of a very positive financial cycle with high income from stamp duty and interest rates are low. There are many other options that have not been considered that would provide better outcomes.

The solution proposed is unsustainable. What is there to sell in 20-25 years, when the proposed new apartments need an overhaul? The government is trying to hide what has been an ongoing mismanagement of the assets, underinvestment in maintenance, and lack of investment in new stock. A better solution would see a strong investment in public housing while retaining green spaces and the amenity of the site.

It is a government responsibility to provide public housing for those in need. It is up to the government to make the right choices and prioritise investment and expenditure in this area.

The proposed arrangement smacks of profits for friends and donors to the relevant political party. It creates great profits for private developers with minimal if any benefit for the community.

In particular the proposal would create only 11 additional public housing dwellings in the Abbotsford St Estate, but 218 private residences. Increased density might be fair exchange for a substantial increase in public housing, but not for developer profits.

- the proposal's ability to accommodate all demographics including families, couples and singles

The proposal does not accommodate all demographics, in fact the proposed plans only include six 3-bedroom apartments. It means that the whole site will be mainly 1 and 2-bedrooms. Families that move out of the area will not be able to come back.

Further, North Melbourne already has a large number of 1 and 2-bedroom flats. What the area lacks is further family accommodation. In fact, the excessive number of 1 and 2-bedroom flats could have the impact of making the area un-attractive to families. This would destroy the fabric of the community.

- the impact of the proposed plan on current tenants

The impact of the proposed plan on current tenants is enormous. Many of the tenants are refugees who have been forced to move from their home countries, often under great danger. They have established a life in the area where, until now, they thought they were safe. Their friends and support networks are here. Their children go to the local school and their children's friends live here too. They are well integrated into the community and this forced move is making them nervous and scared. Most say they are scared to be seen as trouble-makers if they complain, so they remain silent and despondent.

The theory that “mixing” public and private tenants will benefit people in public housing has been proven to be erroneous. Research in other areas does not support this. See Jama and Shaw (2017) research on the Carlton estate:- “the implementation of social mix policies can disadvantage existing residents “(Jama and Shaw, 2017).

- the impact that the increase in density will have on the community and the local environment

The proposed development of the Abbotsford St site would have a massively detrimental impact on the community and the local environment:

- the size of the development is excessive and not in keeping with the context of the neighbourhood, which is family oriented, and diverse.
 - The height of proposed buildings – Up to 9 stories high – is excessive. This area is characterized by low-level buildings. Even the new development diagonally across on Abbotsford St is 3 storeys. The height of the buildings will create a visual bulk that will be unfriendly and unattractive and will destroy the character of the neighbourhood.
 - The proposed development will destroy existing green areas, including a playground that is used not only by the children living in the estate, but by children from all over the neighbourhood.
 - If approved, the development will triple the number of dwellings on the site and will cover almost all green spaces with built forms.
 - At a time when the government is spending large amounts of money to manage the impacts of climate change, it seems perverse that they propose destroying some of the few green spaces left among houses to create another Docklands-style concrete jungle. Given rising temperatures associated with climate change, the preservation of what remains of open space in inner Melbourne should be a priority.
 - The preservation of open space on the Abbotsford estate is even more important given traffic projections with respect to West Gate Tunnel and the large amount of development under way or planned in the area, including something like 15,000 new residents in the Arden St precinct (one block away).
 - The proposed development will put pressure on traffic and parking, reducing the liveability and amenity of the area.
 - The proposal involves overdeveloping the site, converting it into a concrete jungle and taking away existing green spaces. The proposal involves having up to 80% of the site built with the remaining 20% mainly consisting of access roads. Society is in the middle of mental health crisis. Here we have a particularly nice, connecting space that joins people from the flats with neighbours, as all use the park. When this goes and the whole area is flats, there will be no connecting spaces, opportunity or incentive to gather. Balconies are not open spaces.
- whether the process has been transparent and whether there’s been genuine community consultation with affected residents, neighbouring communities and the broader Victorian community.

Whether by design or incompetence, the so-called consultation process has been a disgrace. At every stage, the Department has failed to provide valid information and consult with residents and neighbours, and has not responded to questions and inquiries.

In some cases, it has wilfully misled the community. For example, by providing incorrect information they knew it was incorrect, and not mentioning this until it came out in questioning. A totally unacceptable behaviour from our government representatives. Another case of wilful misrepresentation is the reports on the consultation process produced by the department.

The consultation has been woeful. Neighbours living directly adjacent to the flats (myself included) knew nothing about the proposed plan until the meeting held at the North Melbourne Library on Friday 25 August. At this meeting, it was clear that fewer than 5% of residents and neighbours had been informed. Most, (myself included) had found out about the development and about the meeting from other neighbours and residents.

The project drawings (current) provided by the Department are completely misleading – areas shown as green spaces are not green spaces, but land reserved to build a proposed school. The visualisations show green spaces and setbacks that do not exist and buildings that are much lower than those proposed. This is particularly deceitful, as many people are elderly and/or do not have English as a first language. As such, they tend to look more at the drawings than read the 100s of pages of documentation and reports.

Misleading information regarding the buildings on Molesworth St. At the meeting, Departmental representatives stated more than once that the maximum height of buildings along Molesworth St would be a maximum of 3 storeys high. They omitted the fact that the school, which would occupy most of the Molesworth St frontage, can be as high as 9 storeys, as per their own documentation.

There has been no transparency with respect to the expansion of the North Melbourne Primary School on the site, or whether out-of-hours access to school grounds could be available to estate and local residents.

No transparency on parking. Not clear whether there will be equal access to parking for public and private tenants, or where the parking will be, as there is already a shortage of parking in surrounding streets.

- Other issues of concern

Full authority for the site is being handed to the Minister for Planning under a Development Plan Overlay. Once the Minister for Planning takes control of the site, the terms of the Development Plan Overlay ensure that residents will no longer have any right of appeal. In a democratic country, this should be seen as unacceptable by all.

The Department is trying to push through this change without waiting for the outcomes of the parliamentary review into the housing renewal program (<https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/lpic/article/3842>). This appears totally inappropriate from the perspective of the democratic process, as it locks in to a course of action that might not be the one ultimately chosen by government. The sale and planning changes for Abbotsford St should be halted until the parliamentary inquiry into the public housing renewal program is completed. We wonder about the need to rush it through before the inquiry has the opportunity to report its findings.

Sincerely,

Ana-Maria Rivera

