

RENEWAL OF ABBOTSFORD STREET SITE, NORTH MELBOURNE

I live in Haines Street North Melbourne, opposite this Office of Housing estate. I am opposed to this site being sold to a private developer and wish to see it retained by the State government. I also wish to see the number of apartments expanded to cater for more public housing tenants.

PUBLIC HOUSING WAITING LIST

I understand that the current waiting list stands at at least 35,000. Yet the nine renewal projects that are proposed across the state are expected to add just 1100 apartments.

I have not found any reliable information about how many new tenants this will translate to, or indeed whether it will increase their number at all. If 3-bedroom apartments were to be replaced with 1-bedroom apartments for instance, this would result in a net loss for tenants.

If the government is serious about housing more tenants it should be making more efficient use of the land it has and redevelop it to provide for a significant increase in tenants. Otherwise it is difficult to see how it will ever reduce the waiting list to manageable levels. Once the land is sold off the opportunity to substantially increase accommodation for those who need it will not come again.

The proposed mix for Abbotsford Street is approximately a 2:1 ratio of private to public apartments. There is though I believe a strong case for the entire site to be given over to public housing tenants – or at least a mix of public housing and affordable housing.

A 2:1 ratio of private to public housing is totally inappropriate for land currently owned by the government and providing the perfect opportunity to reduce the current waiting list.

PLANNING PROCESS

I have also been disturbed by the planning process. The initial plan covered the whole site with housing and community facilities. Then a second plan appeared. It takes away 5,500 meters of land for a school, an apparent knee jerk response to win the support of the local community.

Yes, we desperately need additional schools in North Melbourne, and more public transport and more child care and more aged care facilities, not to mention open space. But this site should continue to be used for its current purpose – public housing.

The school is proposed for Molesworth Street – a narrow street that would NEVER cope with school pickups and drop offs, even if the underlying principle was a good one, which it is not. Plans for a school should be deleted from the proposal and the space returned to housing.

I also wish to protest at the decision to make the Minister for Planning the 'responsible authority' to approve the Development Plan and planning permit applications, sidelining the City of Melbourne. The area was only recently rezoned General Residential - with a mandatory maximum height of 11 meters - after considerable community consultation.

To steam-roller local residents and deprive them of appeal rights is clearly undemocratic and an acknowledgement that the height increases proposed will be unpopular with residents, who have fought hard to retain the character of the local area. The proposed height increases will also result in buildings that will overshadow nearby properties.

The height and density of any redevelopment should be in keeping with the surrounding neighbourhood, and as the vigilance of local residents has preserved it.

PRIVATE DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL MIX

I fear that the government will persist with its plan to sell off the site to a private developer. If it does I ask that:

- the ratio of 2:1 private/public housing be reduced to no less than an equal supply of public and private housing, thus making a more meaningful contribution to reducing the waiting list;
- there should be no discernible difference between public and private apartments and facilities – unlike Carlton with its walled off courtyard - with integrated entrances and exits.

My concern that there be no distinction between the standard of the housing and facilities provided to public housing tenants or private residents is about equity, not social engineering.

However, the Frequently Asked Questions distributed by the Department of Health and Human Services include the claim that:

“Research internationally and nationally shows that integrated, mixed tenure communities provide the greatest outcomes for breaking the stigma of social housing, reducing anti-social behaviour and increasing employment, education and other opportunities.”

My research tells me that in fact there is no consensus amongst planners that social mixing does see purported benefits for public housing tenants realised.

The Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute's recent policy brief on Public Housing Renewal and Social Mix has this to say:

“Despite a vast literature compiled over many years – much of it from the US, UK and Europe – findings are inconclusive on a number of important dimensions relating to improving outcomes for disadvantaged households through social mix.

“Many of the mechanisms through which social mix is hypothesised to create benefits for disadvantaged populations are either unproven or their causality remains ambiguous. This is, perhaps, unsurprising given the large range of variables affecting social and economic life within communities.”¹

Kate Shaw and Abdullahi Jama of the School of Geography at the University of Melbourne reached similar conclusions in their paper ‘Why do we need social mix?’.²

They determine that ‘the social mix redevelopment model is not leading to social mixing, that the purported benefits for public housing tenants are unlikely to materialise, and that the implementation of social mix policies can disadvantage existing residents.’

Looking at the harmful impacts they say that ‘social mix policies can disrupt support networks and social structures in low income neighbourhoods (eg. casual childcare and class solidarity).’

The Abbotsford Street site is not a particularly large one, and the current tenants are well integrated into the local community. The claims by the Department about the benefits of a social mix would appear to be more a justification for its current plans than a legitimate case based on evidence.

COMMUNITY BENEFITS OF INVESTMENT IN PUBLIC HOUSING

Many studies have shown the benefits to the community of getting people into stable housing. Precarious housing comes with many costs, and not just to the individual. It costs the community in economic terms as well.

As recently as March this year the University of Melbourne’s Sustainable Society Institute produced a paper titled ‘The Case for Investing in Last Resort Housing’.³

While last resort housing is not the same as public housing apartments, similar principles apply, and there are comparable financial savings to be made. The paper found that individuals in stable housing require less healthcare, and they are more likely to connect with employment and education.

The latter particularly can lead to a more financial secure and productive individual who holds a useful job and does not depend on welfare payments. And most importantly, stable housing can greatly improve the quality of life of individuals.

CONCLUSION

Selling off the land to developers so that they can profit from providing only an extra 10% of public housing would have little impact on the waiting list and leave many individuals inadequately housed.

The Abbotsford Street site is in need of renewal. But any redevelopment should be exclusively for the purpose of accommodating extra public housing tenants.

If this were to happen a meaningful contribution would be made to reducing the waiting list and providing homes for those the many families and individuals now living in desperate circumstances, and in urgent need of accommodation.

And the community would benefit because many new tenants would be better placed to become productive members of society, reducing their reliance on welfare and improving their general wellbeing.

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1 https://www.ahuri.edu.au/policy/ahuri-briefs/public-housing-renewal-and-social-mix?utm_source=AHURINews&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2017Sep1

2 Jama and Shaw (2017, under review) Why do we need social mix? Draft paper to Housing Studies

3 Witte, E. 2017 'The case for investing in last resort housing', MSSSI Issues Paper No 10 Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute, the University of Melbourne