

Legislative Council of Parliament of Victoria
Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program
Submission on Walker St Estate, Northcote

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[REDACTED] 14 November 2017

Preamble

I greatly appreciate the fact that the Committee of Inquiry's administrative procedures permit me to make the present submission to its Inquiry despite the fact that I submitted an earlier version of the same document by mistake to the planning process.

In my capacity as a new (about 2 yrs) joint owner-resident of a house situated close to the Walker St Estate, I attended two public consultations on the proposed Estate rebuild as follows:

- a. 2 August 2017, Northcote Library, organised by Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS) and/or by Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP)

This meeting was announced in a letter delivered to our mailbox for the Walker St Community Room but relocated without further advertisement to the Library, some distance away. Four residents from the 'local area' and perhaps one from the Estate attended the meeting despite this hitch along with a daunting array of consultants, officials and 'experts'. A rep. of one of the departments introduced the session but this was otherwise conducted by a team of consultants who exhibited little or no knowledge of the issues under review.

- b. 24 August 2017, Walker St Community Room, organised by Darebin Council

This meeting was announced in the same manner for, and also held in the Community Room. It was attended by two of the three councillors who represent the ward in which the Estate as well as our house stands, one of whom is currently Mayor, several Council officers, and a large number (and majority) of residents from the Estate and local area.

Although having lived in this area only briefly, I already knew each of the Councillors concerned, while I made the acquaintance of Nick Matteo (Council Planner) and Mark Feenane (Exec. Officer, Vic. Public

Tenants Assoc.) at the first of the two meetings, and had informative discussions with each of these two again at the second.

It is only on later coming into contact with a wider circle of local residents who are as concerned as I am about the Walker St development that I discovered the need to reframe my earlier submission, and resubmit it to the appropriate committee.

Responses to Terms of Reference

1. TOR 1 & 2: Quantity & appropriateness of proposed Estate housing

I agree with Darebin Council's support for the proposal's core theme of seeking not only to improve the quality of the Estate's housing stock but also to increase the number of units on the site.

Greater Melbourne is currently by all accounts experiencing a mounting crisis in the availability of affordable housing (whether rented or owned), and of consequent homelessness. (n.b. Launch Housing reports) It is pleasing to live in any area of town which the State Government has singled out for works which seek to help alleviate these problems.

2. TOR 3 & 9: Minimize tenant disruption

I support Council's advocacy on behalf of current residents of the Estate to the effect that these good people be offered re-housing for the duration of any rebuild in a manner which takes full account of the disruptive influence which the prospect of a rebuild is already, and very understandably, exercising on their lives. There is a crying need for POLICY INITIATIVES designed to develop and maintain effective two-way communication with Estate residents, and to meet their needs. Elements of such initiatives should include: (a) Fast-tracking of decisions relevant to this aspect of the project. (b) The Estate rebuild could be postponed until after the new-build on Penola St, carried out block by block or even replaced by a progressive renovation of the current units.

3. TOR 4: Public/Private mix

The 'public/private mix' of housing appears to mean a range of different things to different parties. At one end of the continuum is the Scandinavian/Dutch model of 'public/community' housing, advocated by Prof. Terry Burke (Swinburne UT). At the other end is the idea of selling land already dedicated to public housing to private developers for the construction of a discordant co-location of public and private apartments. Given the current crises of rental affordability and

homelessness, the latter model would appear to be not only penny-wise and pound-foolish but inhumane.

As Nick Legge argues in his submission (& attachment) to the Inquiry, any loss of public land held in inner Melbourne for housing which embodies the original Public Housing function would be immoral if not also illegal. The means which government used to bring the Walker St Estate site into the public domain would make this doubly so.

I suggest that the units on the Estate if they were to be somewhat increased in number could be an interspersed mix of 'public/community' on the Burke model.

The proportion of public units planned for the Estate rebuild should at the very least be much higher than proposed. The total number of units should on the other hand be a good deal lower than proposed if the rebuild is to avoid overwhelming the valuable public space within the Estate, the surrounding areas, and the local area's traffic carrying capacity.

4. TOR 7: Planning authority & proposed rezoning of Estate

I strongly support the position argued forcefully in Council's submission that DELWP bow out of planning this initiative, and so return Council to its rightful place as the 'responsible authority' for the proposed development rather than doubling down on its decision to occupy this role.

Attendance at the two meetings provided me with a clear demonstration about which of these two bodies was the more competent to manage a development of this nature and magnitude, and of such potentially great impact on the the people likely to be most directly affected by it – the residents of the Estate, and also of the local area, let alone the homeless who so conspicuously inhabit the CBD.

I also strongly support Council's opposition to the proposed rezoning of the Estate from Residential Use Zone (RUZ) to Mixed Use Zone (MUZ), having among other things completely failed to understand the need for this in the light of the relevant planning documents and the local retail scene.

5. Another related matter: the Merri Creek foreshore

I vigorously support Council's call for a path along the Merri creek foreshore which defines the Estate's northern face. The fence which currently bounds the Estate's in this direction probably serves an important function in separating toddlers and pets safely to one side,

from the wilderness and snakes below. This fence should, as Council suggests, permit gated passage at each end, and in the middle.

The planners could make an important contribution to the ambience of the Estate, and thus to the wellbeing of Estate residents among others, by initiating consultations with relevant bodies (MCMC & Melbourne Water among others) towards drawing up a management plan for the stretch of Creek foreshore (north side) which runs from Northcote Bridge to the Rushall Station footbridge. This area is currently an inaccessible and neglected waste-land which does nothing to lift anyone's sense of well-being, and least of all that of any tenants of public housing who may be having a hard time.