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Submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Public Housing Renewal Program with reference to the Abbotsford Street site, North Melbourne

I believe the current proposals for this estate, and other public housing estates, are misguided, bad policy and extremely poor planning. In the case of North Melbourne specifically, the plans flout the General Residential Zone criteria for the area by suggesting buildings of up to nine storeys (originally up to 12 storeys) where a maximum of three storeys applies. There is also total disregard for the community's wishes for this estate and for the heritage aspects of the neighbourhood.

The whole process has been rushed and poorly advertised, with many local people asserting they were not properly notified of meetings, and meetings were run incompetently. The State Government ordered Planning Panels Victoria to appoint a Social Housing Renewal Standing Advisory Committee to assess the proposal for Abbotsford Street, North Melbourne, with the hearing to begin on 13 November 2017. The committee's findings will be released long before this Parliamentary Inquiry is due to report. On no account should plans for the North Melbourne estate proceed before this inquiry panel has issued its report.

Further concerns are:

1. The massive increase in density and height of most proposed towers on the estate, with concomitant loss of public open space, trees, lawn areas, established vegetation and children's play space, is untenable. Such a development would be completely out of character with the neighbourhood. Tall towers do not encourage community interaction.
2. The City of Melbourne's Robyn Pollock, in her Statement of Expert Evidence, recommends that the DPO have a preferred maximum height of five storeys for all development precincts on the Abbotsford Street site. Where buildings front streets, the upper storeys should be set back further. On the Molesworth Street frontage, the interface should have a maximum of three storeys, with additional storeys limited to two with a minimum setback of 10 metres.
3. The sudden decision, announced on 25 August 2017, to include an 'education' component, although the precise nature of this was not stated, was extraordinary. The claim that this responded to the community's feedback is incorrect. All that was suggested was incorporating preschool or kindergarten into the estate. The 5500 square metres of "land for future school provision" would consume the site's remaining public open space. It is apparent that North Melbourne Primary School has endorsed this as being in some way under its umbrella. The site is not big enough for a school. Ms Pollock suggests it is misleading to describe this triangular site as 'green' while noting it is "for educational purposes". She believes the nine storeys allocated in the DPO and the footprint "are inappropriate on this site for any use". A building would further erode open space and permeability.
4. The proposed 10 per cent increase in public housing across the nine estates is totally inadequate, given the long waiting list for accommodation and the ever-increasing numbers of homeless people in Victoria. It is not even clear what the 10 per cent comprises — people or buildings. These are not necessarily the same thing.
5. The selling of this public land to private developers for profit is disgraceful. The whole site should be retained for public housing, and the quality of that housing should meet at least the standards required by the new State Government provisions.
6. The local council should retain planning controls and responsibility for the estate, and third-party appeal rights should be maintained.

7. As proposed, the redevelopment does not cater adequately for families, having too many one- and two-bedroom dwellings. This would force local families to move out and would result in an unsatisfactory mix of residents. Estates function better where elderly and middle-aged people, young people and children are all part of the community.
8. The proposed integration of private and public housing, while it sounds promising, may not work. Reports on the redeveloped Carlton housing estate say the attempt there has been unsuccessful, with a stark physical and social division existing between residents of the two types of housing.
9. It is unclear what will happen to the residents while the renewal takes place and after its completion. They should be accommodated nearby if they wish, to maintain local ties and friendships, and guaranteed a place in the North Melbourne estate when it is finished. A number of residents choose to live here because of the proximity to health services and hospitals where their various ailments are treated. Children should be able to continue their education at local schools.

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