

Inquiry into the Impact of the State Government's decision to change the Urban Growth Boundary submission from Friends of the Earth (Melbourne) Inc

Friends of the Earth (Melbourne) Inc is a community based environmental organisation, which has been active in Melbourne since 1973.

We welcome the opportunity to provide a submission to this Inquiry. Because of the constitution of our organisation, we wish to provide comment specifically on the question of the likely impacts of the State Government's decision to change the urban growth boundary on landholders and the environment, and in particular, the environment. Time constraints prevent us from preparing a more extensive submission.

Ecological impacts

The current intention to expand the Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) have been widely opposed because of the substantial ecological losses and fragmentation that would come with the release of another 45,000 hectares to low density urban sprawl.

These areas, composed at present of largely non-urban zones, together with metropolitan parks and other fringe areas of special significance play a vital role in protecting areas which are critical for Melbourne's future as a liveable city. They have been further protected by legislative and planning provisions introduced as part of Melbourne 2030, which added a further three green wedges and an Urban Growth Boundary. The Green Wedges were established to be Melbourne's breathing spaces, to separate the urban development along the transport corridors.

The need to contain outward growth (suburban sprawl) was a fundamental and very sound objective of Melbourne 2030. Instead of containing outward growth, the State Government is now actively encouraging it. This will bring a range of immediate and negative ecological impacts and social difficulties in the medium to longer term.

Particular impacts of the proposed expansion are most acute in terms of the potential loss of more than 6,000 hectares of grasslands that are likely to be destroyed by new urban developments.

Native grasslands are among the most heavily cleared and endangered ecosystems in Victoria. However, new studies suggest that up to 30,000 ha of native grasslands, of varying quality, survive on Melbourne's western fringe.

We believe that the reasons to protect these remaining grasslands and associated ecosystems are well presented and argued in the submission from the Victorian National Parks Association dated July 2009 and the submission from Green Wedges Coalition, dated October 2009.

social impacts

No expansion of the UGB should be undertaken until the public transport needs of the existing UGB has been met. To expand the boundary with plans to put in place some public transport is inadequate in light of the existing lack of public transport services.

Without a well thought out public transport plan, most people living in the proposed new communities will be forced into car dependence, and hence be locked into rising petrol costs and increased greenhouse gas emissions. The government should be placing a moratorium on developing new suburbs if they don't have funded plans to ensure adequate public transport to these areas.

In contrast to the current continued sprawl model being advanced by the state government, increasing the development density in existing urban growth areas would also make housing more affordable for purchasers as well as the broader taxpaying community.

An obvious social risk associated with continued sprawl is heightened risk of bushfire threat actually within Melbourne's suburbs.

Another social cost of the expansion is the loss of existing farmland and the families and businesses that rely on this land.

As Melbourne faces rising oil prices and growing threats to food security because of climate change, our local agricultural assets become even more significant. The state government should place a moratorium on any further urban development until it has carried out a thorough assessment of the likely changes to agricultural production that is likely to occur, and what level of relocalisation of food production might be required on existing farmland that would otherwise be lost to the planned urban sprawl.

In terms of whether the expansion is even needed, you will be aware that there is considerable evidence to suggest this is not the case. For instance, research conducted by Jenni Bundy (2009) shows that at 15 lots per hectare, there would be enough development land within the current UGB to last for more than 15 years (with higher density able to extend this time frame considerably).

Conclusion

- We urge the government to withhold from expanding the UGB for at least another 5 years, as recommended last year by the Government's Melbourne 2030 Audit report.
- The government should be placing a moratorium on developing new suburbs if they don't have funded plans to ensure adequate public transport to these areas.
- The government should consider introducing a Protection of Agricultural Land Bill, which would aim to stop further encroachment on agricultural areas until a full assessment of agriculture in the light of climate change has been carried out.

Further details can be found in our Submission to the Growth Areas Authority on the 'Urban Growth Boundary Review', dated July 2009.

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