



Melbourne
25 Coventry Street
Southbank VIC
3006 Australia
T 03 9699 6688
F 03 9696 6234

sjb.com.au
urban@sjb.com.au

SJB Urban is a
Carbon-Neutral
company

Gayle Tierney
Committee Chair
Environment and Planning Committee
Legislative Council
Parliament House
Spring Street
Melbourne VIC 3002

By email to richard.willis@parliament.vic.gov.au

Re: Submission to the Environment and Planning Reference Committee: Improving the Health and Wellbeing of Communities

30 June 2011

Dear Gayle,

This submission has been prepared by Simon McPherson, Director of SJB Urban Pty Ltd, and specialist urban design consultancy. Simon is leading an ongoing, in-house (not commissioned) research project entitled 'Shall We Dense?' which considers the implications of development patterns for urban performance outcomes.

It is my opinion that we need to better understand the relationships between development patterns and a broad range of liveability considerations for cities, which are closely related to health and wellbeing in communities. This understanding should form a basis for more rigorous, forward-looking planning of urban areas, including new urban growth (greenfield) and infill redevelopment in established areas.

The liveability considerations which are largely determined by development patterns and urban design include the following, all of which have clear implications for physical and mental health and wellbeing:

- Accessibility (by walking, cycling and public transport)
- Economic viability of facilities and services (shops, community infrastructure)
- Vibrancy – people on the street, activity
- Safety, through increased activity
- Infrastructure – reduced costs, more efficient usage
- Personal choice
- Affordability



Currently our policy framework is too flexible, or not specific enough, in terms of delivering an appropriate diversity, variation and mix across all neighbourhoods. This mix is essential to engender our urban areas with resilience and relevance over extended timeframes, to respond to changing demographics, economic circumstances, and population growth, as well as sustainability imperatives.

It is important to note that the initiatives which drive environmentally sustainable development are consistent with healthy cities for people.

Accessibility (by walking, cycling and public transport)

A vibrant, varied and mixed urban area provides interesting destinations within walking distance of homes, visual interest or things to see, and supports effective public realm infrastructure, with streets and spaces that are well-used. Optimising the value of infrastructure investment, and supporting local business and community facilities, relies on these being conveniently accessible by means other than the private car. In turn, viable and vibrant local centres form a focal point for neighbourhoods and communities, and are an essential aspect of (sub)-urban areas.

Economic viability of facilities and services (shops, community infrastructure)

Development patterns and housing mix are closely connected to the viable provision of services and facilities. These require a certain ‘critical mass’ of people within close proximity, to ensure they are accessible and well-patronised. Small activity centres are essential, and form the ‘glue’ in the urban structure which holds everything else together – they are the focus of local, community activity, a great place for meeting, interaction, convenience shopping, transport and community interaction.

Vibrancy

More people living within a designated area results in more people using streets, footpaths, parks, spaces and local facilities. This makes places feel safer and more attractive, and supports social interaction. Community members are encouraged to spend time in the public environment, because it is an enjoyable experience. This is what cities are all about.

This is a fundamental aspect of physical and mental health. Urban development patterns which encourage walkability and local movement provide a reason for physical exercise. Those that are car-dependent, do the opposite.

Integrated, mixed and vibrant urban areas provide plentiful opportunity for informal, interpersonal engagement in the public environment, which is vital for mental health, and combats social isolation. Dispersed, car-dependent areas actively discourage social engagement.



Safety, through increased activity

Having more people around makes public places feel safer. Empty streets and spaces feel isolated, uncared for, and potentially risky or dangerous.

Also, a greater connection to the public realm (streets, parks and spaces) encourages a sense of community 'ownership' of these spaces, and encourages people to look after the places and people in them. This is vital for making places feel safe, and safety is a vital aspect of encouraging activity and social interaction, for health and wellbeing.

Infrastructure

As has been revealed through other studies, it is much less expensive, and more efficient, to provide infrastructure for compact, diverse urban areas, than dispersed, low-density areas. More compact development also results in more efficient usage of infrastructure, including utilities, streets, community spaces, parks and so on.

Personal choice

Typically, our contemporary urban development areas are very homogeneous. They lack essential diversity and variation.

In growth areas, the provision of housing is dominated by large, single detached houses, usually with 3-4 bedrooms, to garage spaces. There is very little supply of other housing types, assuming a dominance of family households.

In inner areas, the current provision of dwellings is vastly dominated by studio, one- and two-bed apartments, which also provide for a narrow demographic range.

It is important to note that even if current market demand or consumer preference is for certain housing types, over time this demand will change, as families grow, split up, children leave home and seek housing independently, parents downsize or grow elderly, and so on. That is, the market changes, requiring diversity and variation in housing supply. All areas should have a broad mix of housing types and sizes.

Affordability

By reducing the requirements for car ownership by living in more accessible and well-serviced locations, households can achieve dramatic financial savings over the period of home ownership. There are significant, direct personal and financial costs to car-dependent living, and the failure to address this amounts to negligent urban planning, especially as fuel prices and traffic congestion continue to rise.



Making it happen

It is possible to achieve a highly efficient, sustainable, diverse urban development pattern which is appropriate to each location, and which provides:

- Easy, walkable access from all dwellings to at least a local activity centre, as well as schools and good public transport
- Viable commercial and community facilities
- High levels of choice of dwelling types and locations. All preferences can be accommodated
- Modest, low-rise built form, without the need for high-rise buildings.

Our research has identified a model to guide residential densities, housing type mix and activity centre types from the smallest local centre or corner store, to the largest centre, with appropriate residential mix across this hierarchy. A report detailing the model may be accessed from SJB Urban's website at www.sjb.com.au.

Our ongoing research and work in this area continues to attract significant interest in Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales, for its in-depth understanding of policy implications for urban/community outcomes. I would be happy to discuss this work, or the contents of this submission, at the appropriate time.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to the Environment and Planning Reference Committee.

Sincerely

Simon McPherson
Director