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Richard Willis,
Secretary
Select Committee on Public Land Development
Legislative Council,
Parliament House,
East Melbourne. 3002.

Dear Sir

INQUIRY INTO THE SALE AND DEVELOPMENT OF PUBLIC LAND AND OPEN SPACE

The City of Darebin would like to make a submission to the Inquiry into the Sale and Development of Public Land and Open Space. By way of introduction I would like to endorse and support the Municipal Association of Victoria's submission to the Legislative Council's Inquiry. In summary, this submission is based around the following points:

- the role public land plays in a densely settled urban area;
- the value of public land; and
- the need for a strategic overview of land holdings and their relevance to the community

Public land owned by the State Government forms part of the network of facilities, borrowed places and open spaces in an urban municipality like Darebin. At typical inner urban land values, it is impossible to retrofit a dense urban network with open space and consequently existing undeveloped areas of public land make a significant contribution to the perception as well as the actuality of open spaces. The land known as the Merri Common is a good example. The Merri Common is VicTrack land south of the Merri Station on the Epping line. The land makes a significant contribution to the open space network in a part of the municipality not well endowed with undeveloped land. It is currently used by a number of groups on a formal and informal basis. It would also make an attractive development site because of the size of the land. However the community need and perception is that this land is publicly owned open space and no weight is given to the level of government (Federal, State or Local) that holds the title.

This perception also extends to the built form. For example, the historic cluster of public buildings (e.g. Town Hall, library, Post Office and Police Station) provided a visionary focus for the concentration of public activities in accessible locations. Over 100 years later, this clustering of activities is an approach encouraged by Melbourne 2030, particularly in Activity Centres. Many of these public buildings are now being used for alternative purposes. The Northcote Town Hall is an example of a former administrative centre that is now being used for community activities including an arts and culture focus. The State Government now wish to dispose of the former Northcote Police Station, but also there is an opportunity to add to this cluster, by including the building in the arts precinct with an appropriate use. Such a move would encourage the clustering opportunities provided by the juxtaposition of these public buildings and promote the objectives of Melbourne 2030 which is an opportunity that should not be lost.

The sale of surplus assets can provide attractive returns for government. However many of these assets are slithers of land that have a number of infill issues that need to be addressed as part of the approvals process. Often of these issues are inadequately dealt with because the land owner rarely becomes the land developer and as a consequence Council is left to deal with and manage what becomes a less than satisfactory situation.

Some further examples will help to illustrate these points.

Former VicTrack land in Herbert Street, Northcote was declared surplus to needs and a rezoning of the land to residential was sought. As part of the amendment process a six metre high acoustic wall was recommended to protect new residents from the noise of railway operations. This decision created an undesirable urban design outcome with a large and unsightly wall framing the end of streets where previously there were sightlines through the site. VicTrack has sold the land and moved on and Council is now left with the issue of dealing with an inappropriate design outcome and considerable resident concern about this outcome.

On the other hand the Central Creek grasslands, in the north of the municipality, is an example of where a cooperative working arrangement between the two levels of government have worked to achieve a good result. Here a proposal to subdivide land included some remnant native grasslands of State significance. With the cooperation of VicUrban and the Department of Sustainability and Environment it was possible to retain the significant areas in public ownership, which are now managed by the Council on behalf of the State Government.

Darebin is an inner/middle ring municipality where land values have increased dramatically over the past decade and more. Consequently, the ability of the Council to acquire land for public use is very constrained. Where public land is offered at market value it is often beyond the resources of this Council and cannot be justified to represent good value for money as a public use. Public land should also be valued as a community asset and not simply in terms of the highest monetary return. In Darebin the minimum area regarded as viable and appropriate for open space is 0.25 ha. Land of this size could be converted into around eight dwellings which means that, in market value terms, the municipality could not afford to acquire additional land for open space. At a conservative value of \$500,000 per dwelling the total of \$4 million for 0,25 ha is not an amount this Council would pay for a small area of open space. As a result remaining public land plays a significant role, regardless of ownership, to the open space network and its value to the community cannot be measured in purely market driven terms.

Often the sale of public land is driven by internal assessments of whether land is surplus to needs. This assessment is frequently made in isolation of other considerations and a whole of government approach. As a result Councils are presented with a series of isolated requests for rezoning or development proposals. What is needed is a more strategic and holistic assessment of public land which involves the Council at all stages rather than a series of as hoc proposals which Council then is required to implement. This approach would require a review of public land holdings on a municipal basis with an assessment of a longer term view of the future use of the land.

If you would more information please contact Michael Ballock, Manager of Urban Development on 8470 8481.

Yours sincerely

Michael Ulbrick

Chief Executive Officer