

PERSPECTIVE



The crisis that Sydney

As Sydney's problems escalate, the NSW government is chopping planning budgets and staff and has closed a key agency. Concerned players are asking what is going on.

Story Lisa Allen

Sydney has reached a planning nadir. The road system's clogged, housing is under pressure and, worst of all, there's not enough water. For some, housing is not affordable. For others, it's a case of squeezing the biggest six-bedroom castle onto the smallest block. Home owners want huge houses. Planners want medium density. And the City of Sydney wants a network of villages.

Somewhere in between are cashed-up articulate community groups with one mandate: to protect their turf at any cost.

Adding further pressure is the NSW government's decision to overhaul the state's absurdly complicated planning system at the same time as it cuts the planning budget, retrenches 500 staff from the Department of Infrastructure Planning and Natural Resources, and transfers another 240 positions out of the department.

The government has also axed a key planning agency, the Urban Design Advisory Group (UDAS).

Senior state bureaucrats say they have never seen the state's planning system in such disarray. Morale is low, and there's little confidence among some of the publicly employed urban planners running the show.

The government defends its position, arguing it has indeed got a plan – it's called the Sydney Metropolitan Planning Strategy. Yet Ed Blakely, the American academic running the SMPSP – due for release in January – does not speak with any confidence about the future of Australia's largest city and how it is being managed.

"We're at a big crossroad in planning," he says. "Whatever we do has to be done right. We may not get another shot; if we stuff it up where do we turn? We don't have any more land. We can't use a new land base to get started again and we can't move big pieces of infrastructure around."

Blakely, who is professor of

Urban and Regional Planning at Sydney University, moved to Australia just nine months ago.

"It's a hard job," he says, "because everything is coming at us at once – we have population and infrastructure pressures and we also have the budget pressures. These stars aren't lining up."

Some private sector planners are even calling for a royal commission. And planning failures are also attracting the ire of big business.

Chris Corrigan, head of Patrick Corporation, still smarting from the rejection of his rail plans which he claims would

significantly reduce road traffic in Sydney's south-west, told the ABC he has very little confidence in NSW's planning system. "We seem to have almost no thought for the future," he said. "We seem to bumble along until a crisis emerges. We live in crisis city."

But the government says the massive job losses from the planning department coupled with a 50 per cent cut in consultancies will contribute \$70 million in savings which will free up money for teachers, nurses, police and other essential government services.

Yet Blakely says the problems of

very strong fiscal accountability in this state, high demand for housing and not enough water, will not be easy to deal with.

"My big problem is to work out where we put new housing units for new population [Sydney attracts an extra 50,000 residents a year]. How do we do that so we don't use up any more of the precious natural environment?"

As the professor and his 50 staff formulate the new planning strategy, urban design consultants and planners as well as bureaucrats – who will not speak for fear of recriminations from the Carr government – are left

Beautiful one day but much

The radical plan to ease the population crush in south-east Queensland has upset the natives.

Story Mark Ludlow and Kathy Mac Dermott

Welcome to the new south-east Queensland. If you thought moving to the Sunshine State from overcrowded Sydney and Melbourne was going to deliver you a traditional "Queenslander" on a big block with a verandah and a yard for the kids to play – think again.

You may have better luck driving another 1000 kilometres up the coast to Mackay or Rockhampton before you are guaranteed to find your dream Queensland lifestyle over the next 20 years.

The Beattie government's ambitious regional plan released this week – which dictates where development can occur in south-east Queensland until 2026 – attempts to tackle the issue of growth head on.

But for all the talk about "urban footprints" and no-go zones for development, one thing is for certain: the urban consolidation that forms the basis of the planning regime will change the face of the region forever.

People move to south-east Queensland so they can have the large acreage block, not to cram into apartment blocks next to railway stations in the western suburbs. If they wanted that they would move to Parramatta or Footscray.

Beattie and Deputy Premier and Treasurer Terry Mackenroth believe the south-east corner can cope with the 1 million extra people who will move there over the next two decades, taking the population from 2.4 million to 3.7 million.

But Local Government and Planning Minister Desley Boyle has a more pragmatic approach to the population surge in the south-east.

At a recent convention on the Gold Coast she encouraged southerners – or "Mexicans" as some Queenslanders still feel the need to call those born south of the Tweed River – to "keep driving" up the coast rather than

clog up the 200km of urban sprawl either side of Brisbane.

The draft regional plan for south-east Queensland 2026 aims to protect 80 per cent of land from urban development.

The two main themes of the plan are moving an additional 250,000 people away from the coastal strip down the western corridor towards and past Ipswich.

In each greenfield development the scheme targets a lift in yields from a current eight to 11 blocks per hectare to a minimum of 15 blocks.

The remaining "urban footprint" will accommodate 500,000 additional people through urban consolidation. This means smaller blocks and higher density living.

As Brisbane Lord Mayor Campbell Newman noted this week, most people support the idea of green land between urban areas – but they don't want a big flat built next to them. Something has got to give because the two are not compatible.

The new planning regime is not like any airy-fairy plans of the past – such as SEQ2001 and SEQ2021 which tried to control growth but lacked any statutory

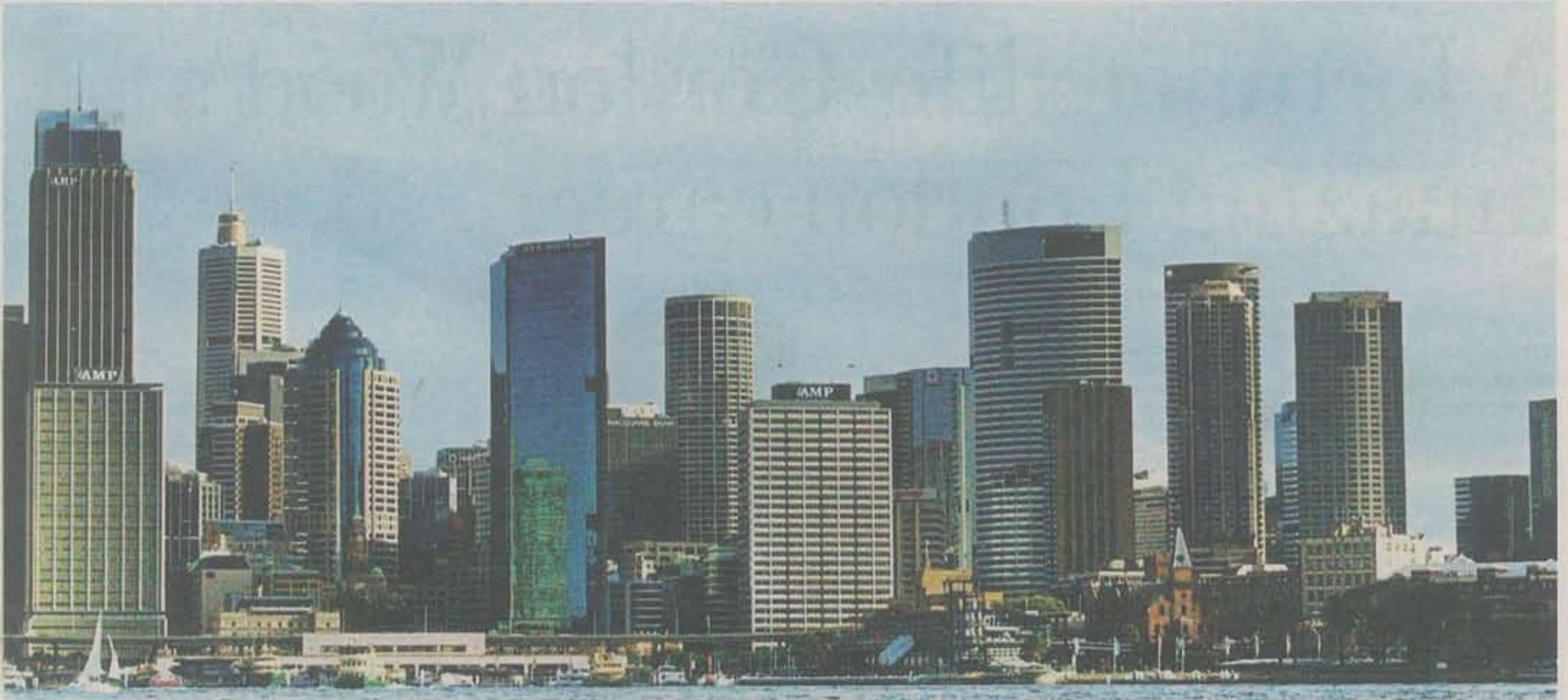


Photo Rob Homer/afrphotos.com.au

didn't plan for

scratching their heads asking what is going on.

UDAS, a 17-member team of the state's brightest and most capable planners, was shut down on September 1. Together with government architect Chris Johnson, UDAS had responsibility for coming up with the detail to give effect to Premier Bob Carr's wish for better design of multi-unit apartments. Today, just two UDAS planners remain.

UDAS was the only state agency providing advice to local councils who could not afford a resident planner and are struggling to come to grips with the state

government's new decree that every Local Environment Plan [which sets the key planning parameters for an area] is reviewed, re-drafted and reduced to just one per council. About 5500 LEPs will be reduced to a mere 152.

UDAS staff learned via newspaper reports that their agency, set up in the mid-1990s, was headed for the Carr government scrap heap.

"I think, for local government's sake, it's a very unfortunate step to have taken because UDAS provided the bridge between state government objectives and the

physical reality of those objectives. It helped councils develop strategies to deliver a good built environment," says one former UDAS staffer.

Another ex-UDAS member, Russell Olsson, says losing UDAS has created a vacuum. "There's a definite need to have a bridge between planning and development," he says. "There is a need to shape the future city. Everyone talks about Sydney growing but the place has to be shaped."

After the 2003 state election the Carr government sold the idea of combining the Department of

Planning with Natural Resources as a way of significantly reducing costs, but several executives now believe the government had more on its mind than just bolstering the surplus.

Jobs have been restructured, there's low morale and many believe that Victorian public servant Jennifer Westacott has been brought in as NSW Planning Director-General, the most senior planning position, to chop heads. She was a health bureaucrat with no former planning experience.

"For some inexplicable reason the planning departments have had their staff decimated," says one senior planner, "just as we go into a period of significant planning re-positioning and new long-term visions."

The president of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects NSW, Caroline Pidcock, recently tried to get to the bottom of Sydney's planning crisis and set up a meeting with the NSW premier. But Carr cancelled it.

"The institute is incredibly supportive of the Minister's desire to streamline planning processes and develop a metropolitan strategy," says Pidcock.

"But there's some concern that the department is not well equipped to do what they have in mind because there was a decision to cut its budget by cabinet and they were instructed to lose a lot of staff."

"Usually when you lose your staff you lose your better people."

Pidcock can't understand how, after several years of reaping huge dollars from stamp duties, the government is cutting so heavily into the planning budget. She wants to know where the money has gone.

"I think Planning Minister Craig Knowles is trying to make the planning system work, and it's great he's doing that," she says. "But you can't just have a strategy. You have to have a very good department to implement what he's trying to do and the industry is really concerned that the department isn't at its strongest."

Meanwhile, some planning strategies have fallen into the too-hard basket. The government has put the South Sydney Development Corporation – which has the task of co-ordinating big housing, commercial and transport projects – on hold until the Metropolitan Planning Strategy is in place.

The City of Sydney continues to argue that Sydney should be set up as a network of villages. Deputy Lord Mayor John McInerney says the city also needs a light rail network because the public bus system has reached capacity.

"Once we get the core public transit system fixed we can rearrange the streets and organise the local village," he says. "We will connect all these villages with bike ways and pedestrian ways."

Perhaps that's pie-in-the-sky stuff.

But the facts remain. The further west you venture out of Sydney the worse it gets. Rodney Jensen, former chairman of the Australian Institute of Urban Studies (NSW) says the aspirational classes are building houses that are too big, creating unsatisfactory townscapes.

"There's a divergence between what the aspirational market wants in terms of planning and what the planners think they need," he says.

"Planners want medium density. The aspirational classes want castles in the west. They think the bigger the house, the larger the profit they will make on it when they sell."

Jensen says a lot more time and resources are devoted to planning for small inner-city developments than is spent on the outer metropolitan release areas. But he sees the major crisis as house affordability. The price of the average house has more than doubled since 1996, and buying a property is now beyond the reach of many people.

Closer to town, he says many inner-city councils are like gated estates. "The door is firmly locked against imaginative urban renewal," he says.

further north the next

force and consequently were mostly ignored.

The new plan, although only in draft form until February 28 next year, is enforceable by law now.

Mackenroth, as head of the Office of Urban Management, and Boyle both have "call-in" power over any development which may be approved by any of the 18 councils in south-east Queensland.

It may be the "planning body with teeth" that Mackenroth wanted but will forcing high-density living on a state fiercely proud of its 800-sq-metre blocks bring an end to the laid-back Queensland lifestyle?

At the launch of the new plan, Beattie was at pains to stress that people now favoured the inner-city cafe culture of Sydney and Melbourne rather than the 32-perch block.

He highlighted the inner-city suburb of New Farm – once the home of derelicts and prostitutes but now the hip place for young professionals and middle-aged couples whose have packed up their suburban home for a two-bedroom apartment close to the CBD.

Beattie is counting on other urban renewal projects matching

the popularity of New Farm. He wants 40 per cent of the new dwellings to be provided in infill and redevelopment projects, rising to 50 per cent between 2016 to 2026.

It's an ambitious target, particularly given the fact that the planning legislation hasn't changed in terms of the rights of the community to object.

Mackenroth is doing his best to deliver the "tough love" solutions to Queensland's growing pains.

Developers are predicting log-jams of court cases over density disputes and although Mackenroth has the ultimate power to call in projects, many think this solution will be politically unpalatable.

Analyst Michael Matusik of Matusik Property Insights thinks the draft plan is "fundamentally very good", but acknowledges that

people are fearful of changes in their residential landscape.

"What is new, people reject," he says, especially in conservative Queensland.

But Matusik argues the draft plan delivers choice and a pragmatic recognition of the south-east corner's transport constraints.

"It's not like everyone will be forced to live in 32-level units. But there are lots of students and generation X-ers who are renting with four people in a house and would much prefer to rent an apartment that they could share with one person right next to facilities, universities, work, and night clubs."

Others have suggested a population cap for south-east Queensland or infrastructure charges at the home-buyer level, with people to be slugged for the privilege of moving to the south-east corner.

Mackenroth – the hard-man of Queensland politics – is doing his best to deliver the "tough love" solutions to Queensland's growing pains. It's going to hurt, and the sweeping cane fields and spacious Queenslanders may soon be a relic of the past.