

Planning for Living Well

Liveability is a 'hot' term at the State Government right now. Earlier this year, the Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission held an Inquiry into enhancing the state's liveability, while the Growth Areas Authority, the state organization responsible for greenfields development at metropolitan Melbourne's edge, published a guide to enhancing liveability in these new settlements.

These endeavors build on international rankings of urban liveability. The two best known rankings are the ones carried out by Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) and Mercer Consulting Services, from a perspective of globalized firms and their employees' needs. Melbourne tied for 2nd in the 2005 EIU ranking, but only placed 17th in Mercer ranking.

As well as a somewhat limited focus on attracting big business, both rankings measure the absence of negatives such as crime and pollution rather than progress or innovation. But even with these cautions, the criteria used would resonate with most people: safety from crime and threat, population health, environment, and education.

The central question of both the VCEC inquiry and the Growth Areas guide is: **What can the Victorian State Government do to enhance liveability factors?** The answer, unsurprisingly, is a lot. The State of Victoria has primary responsibility for health care, land use and social planning, education, and transportation. The impacts of investments made now by the present government will reverberate for years, if not generations. One of the challenges of democratic governance is making decisions with long-term consequences, when the mandate for governments is relatively short-term. It thus takes courage and vision for a government to really make a difference.

So how well is the State of Victoria doing in supporting and enhancing liveability? Unfortunately, the answer would appear to be "great rhetoric and mediocre results". Each year, the Planning Institute of Australia polls its members to determine a state-by-state report card. In November 2007, Victoria scored an overall C, with a rather damning D on public transport. If Victoria was my child and came home with that report card, I'd be sending it for extra tutoring over the summer holidays.

More importantly than the ranking of planners, most of whom work in or with local and state governments, is the widespread perception of the public that Victoria is not investing enough in public transport, public education, affordable housing and public services, at a time when the state is thriving economically, has a budget surplus, and Melbourne is the fastest growing metropolis in the country. Widespread and growing deficiencies are experienced by the growing number of commuters using public transport, parents using the public education system, and residents unable to access nearby jobs and social services, particularly in middle and outer suburbs. If their needs are ignored, the current Victorian government will face electoral disaster, as well as a questionable legacy

Let's take the example of community safety. For the past several years, the Victorian state government has developed and implemented an excellent comprehensive approach to responding to family violence, particularly intimate partner violence and child abuse. There is a need, however, to support expanding this comprehensive approach – involving police, courts, social and health services - to preventing

violence before it ruins lives. There is also the need to expand this kind of comprehensive approach to violence in the public sphere, including violence in and around licensed premises. The Victorian State Government developed such an approach with its Safer Streets and Homes policy, which ran from 2002-2005, and was led by the Department of Justice. However, lack of short-term results and political commitment led to this integrated approach being quietly dropped.

There is also strong evidence that a locally-based approach is best. There are several local government/community coalitions (including those in Maribyrnong, Darebin, and Nillumbik) that are pursuing this kind of comprehensive approach. Victoria needs to develop a new and improved Safe Communities approach that can build on international best practice. For instance, Bogota, Colombia, has developed a comprehensive approach to preventing both traditional forms of violence and aggressive driving, which has led to 70% decline in the murder rate and a 60% decline in road deaths between 1992 and 2005.

Population health is another good example of where planners and governments can make a difference. Despite relatively good medical services, Australia is facing an obesity epidemic, which in turn has huge potential impacts for preventable diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and certain cancers. Particularly disturbing are rates of overweight and obesity amongst children. One in four Australian children were overweight or obese in 2004, as compared to 5% of Australian children in 1960. This trend is caused by increased intake of fatty and sugary foods and beverages, but also by lack of everyday exercise such as walking to school, which used to be taken for granted. One longitudinal study in a primary school in the Melbourne suburb of Essendon found that 65% of children walked to school and 25% were driven in 1974. At the same school in 2005, only 8% walked and 89% were driven. In Melbourne, one third of primary school aged children walk less than five minutes a day.

While Victorian government policies such as *Go For Your Life* are supporting healthier lifestyles, the rate of type 2 diabetes, strongly correlated with rising weight, has doubled between 2001 and 2006. What can be done?

Car dependency is a huge contributor to growing obesity rates, particularly in middle and outer suburbs of Melbourne where access to nearby public transport and services is low. This, in turn, leads to traffic safety concerns for children walking and cycling to schools, shops, parks, and friends' houses, which in turn leads to a classic vicious circle: parents chauffeur their children because they feel the streets are too unsafe, due to excessive car traffic partly caused by the parents themselves driving their children.

A hallmark of some European and Japanese cities is the relative freedom of children to access public spaces. This is related to design measures such as safe road crossings and traffic calming measures (for instance, a basic 30 km/h speed limit in Danish and Swedish cities), but also to a different social attitude towards collective responsibility for children's welfare and also a different attitude towards risk.

So for reasons of health as well as safety, we come back to the need for Victoria to invest in public transport and public service infrastructure, as a necessary precondition for the kinds of activity centres promoted in *Melbourne 2030* to work. The needs and perspectives of children need to be included in planning decisions, particularly those related to transportation and service planning. As is the case with violence prevention, several local governments are doing stellar work in supporting Child Friendly Cities,

including Bendigo, Brimbank, and Port Phillip. The state government should be providing financial and training support to local governments to do this work. Even more importantly, the State government needs to respond to the transport and service needs expressed by children. A community that is liveable for children is liveable for everyone.

The problem does not lie with the current state government's conception of liveability (encompassing housing affordability, tackling disadvantage, low crime rates, a cosmopolitan or multicultural way of life, and 'room to grow'), but rather with Treasury commitment to policies and programs that can support these priorities. The hallmark of truly remarkable liveability policy initiatives of recent times –whether from rich governments like Vancouver, Canada, or poor governments like Bogota, Colombia – are truly ambitious goals, whether that goal is to radically reduce the number of people in cars or to halve the murder rate. Once this ambitious goal is set, expenditures and policies can be re-aligned to meet those goals, through simply not building any new highways, as has been the case in the Greater Vancouver Region, or planning a highly symbolic Women's Night Out to celebrate the commitment to women's freedom to use public space after dark, as has happened in Bogota for the last seven years. As planners, we can work to achieve these goals, but success is dependent on the will of governments to turn great rhetoric on liveability into reality.

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