

Democracy can be inconvenient, but people deserve a say

Rose Iser

The Age, May 11, 2009 - 12:00AM

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/democracy-can-be-inconvenient-but-people-deserve-a-say-20090510-az6w.html>

Councils can play a positive role in the push to reform planning.

ASKING for someone's opinion carries the risk they might actually tell you. Ask for permission and it might be refused. But there are even greater risks for democracy when opinions and permission are not regularly and openly sought.

Changes are afoot in the world of planning as pressures, including the financial crisis, drive reform. This is putting conversations between the State Government, councils and communities at risk. Accelerating developments without appropriate engagement with councils makes communities more than a little nervous.

Politicians at all levels can experience pressure to make certain decisions, but debate and progress are not mutually exclusive. While getting consultation right is not easy, if the capacity of citizens to have a say about major planning reforms, or even individual projects, is restricted, politicians face growing cynicism increasingly expressed at ballot boxes.

Councils in Victoria are currently looking for the State Government to have the difficult conversations about significant planning reforms — from a review of the Planning Act, new zones, more new acronyms, growth areas and, of course, the more controversial "call-ins" or ministerial interventions.

The effort being put into planning changes for future liveability is commendable, but there appears to be a degree of scepticism at state level that councils and communities share the same objective and have the capacity to be a constructive part of the discussion.

It should be no surprise to Spring Street that more councils and communities are demanding a bigger say in these changes. The Labor Government was elected in 1999 on a platform of respecting the views of councils and communities in planning.

Councils are not happy that a review of the Planning and Environment Act — something that has not taken place for 22 years — has given us only a few weeks to prepare responses. We do not accept that our input should only be about the "mechanics" of the act. We want to discuss the policy considerations about environmental priorities, permit processes, amendment requirements and other planning issues that will shape the next 20 years of the communities in which we live.

New strategic directions outlined in the [Melbourne@5](#) Million plan have been developed without council and community input on crucial issues such as housing, transport, employment, liveability and, more importantly, the democratic frameworks to plan for this.

Ministerial interventions have caused a stir in recent weeks, with major developments being "called in" to be decided by the minister. In some cases, councillors have found out about the "called-in" decisions through State Government press releases.

Proposed legislation before Parliament to introduce Development Assessment Committees is also causing unease and anger for councils and communities. A DAC will make decisions on behalf of a council, but the members on the DAC will not be directly accountable to the community in the same way as councillors. It is unclear whether community members will be able to present verbal submissions and discuss issues with the DAC members, reducing the opportunity for consultation and informal mediation on large-scale developments in activity centres.

The reality is that more than 95 per cent of planning decisions are already made under delegation by council staff with little controversy and few, if any, objections. Unreasonable blockages in the planning system need to be addressed. But we run the risk of diluting the nature of our democracy if significant planning changes are made without genuine conversations with councils and communities.

Councillors know firsthand that land use planning issues are often the most controversial. But we also know our communities expect us to facilitate bold and open democratic discussions, regardless of the risks. In turn, we are asking the State Government to pause and examine the implications on democracy of rushing through significant planning reforms.

We have to give ourselves time to behave like a democracy — having discussions and hearing views — however inconvenient.

Cr Rose Iser is president of the Victorian Local Governance Association.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/democracy-can-be-inconvenient-but-people-deserve-a-say-20090510-az6w.html>