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To The Department of Planning and Environment
Submission on Medium Density Housing Code

For the Hurlstone Park Association

23rd December 2016

Background

Hurlstone Park is a small suburb, of 1 square km, in the inner west of Sydney. The suburb has significant built and social heritage - marked by attractive low-rise, tree-lined streetscapes, a high proportion of heritage-style homes, and a village-style shopping strip. The community of many families, and post-war immigrants, is close-knit.

Recently the Canterbury-Bankstown Council (in administration) endorsed a heritage study which recommended immediate heritage protection for about 50 individual dwellings, along with several Heritage Conservation Areas throughout the suburb. More than 60% of dwellings in the suburb contribute to its heritage appeal.

The Urban Renewal Strategy, along with rezoning by the previous council, has represented a great threat to the integrity of this unique suburb. Already, large developments totally out of character with the neighbourhood, loom over the suburb from New Canterbury Rd.

At the same time as increasing development, house and unit prices have increased in the area, and we have witnessed most developments being marketed to overseas investors.

Hurlstone Park is not alone in experiencing increasing dilution of heritage streetscapes and demolition of heritage homes - it is happening in Dulwich Hill, Summer Hill, Lewisham, Marrickville, Haberfield, Canterbury, Petersham, Five Dock - all around us.

The need for medium density housing

It is important that a range of housing types are available for current and future residents of Sydney and NSW. We are concerned that most recent development has been medium-high rise apartment blocks.

The draft proposal recommends increasing the supply and quality of low rise medium density housing across NSW such as town-houses and terraces, dual

occupancies and manor homes, and we agree that this is preferable to multiple blocks of units.

The problem is that the plan involves diluting current planning laws and removing community input into developments. While neighbours can be notified, they are unable to object of the development if it is deemed to comply. Forced council amalgamations, forced home acquisitions, the emergence of further planning committees with even greater power, such as the Greater Sydney Commission, have all had the effect of dis-empowering communities and residents in the planning process.

Decentralization has largely been ignored in planning policies, and it is clear than this draft code is really aimed at urban areas. It is important that urban areas retain many of the single story homes and backyards that typify the Australian experience.

There must not be a further dilution of the rights of residents.

This proposal is, like the Urban Renewal Strategy, heavily weighted in favour of developers and builders, (AND private certifiers) to the detriment of established residents and communities.

Planning must be kept under local control, and the DA process enables residents to have a say in their built environment. If anything, residents should have greater input into local planning policies.

Housing affordability

It is concerning that “increasing housing stock” remains the mantra in improving housing affordability, especially for first home buyers. This has not proved to be the case and the core reasons for increasing prices are still not being addressed.

These must be a firm commitment to liaise with the federal government about negative gearing and foreign investment policies. Minister Stokes is to be congratulated for raising the issue of tax reform and inequity in the public arena.

Heritage concerns

In many Sydney suburbs, heritage is important. It is pleasing to note that established street-scapes are a consideration, but there are still many issues in the complying development policy; it appears the government intends to address some of these.

The voracity of Design Verification Statements is questionable. Already, in many DAs, these are simply “cut and paste” documents, and proformas will surely be developed to ensure that, on paper, a development is complying. Heritage streetscapes are not simply about setbacks, scale and landscaping. Retaining backyards is also an important heritage concern. A place for trees and a hills hoist is important for suburbs to retain some valued green space (rather than a strip of planted shrubs).

Residents must have input into developments in their area to ensure that the development fits in with the community. To allow otherwise is non-democratic. We have previously seen lax planning laws in the post-war era ruin many beautiful heritage homes in suburbs such as Hurlstone Park and Haberfield. The state should not mandate what individual communities should accept as complying developments, as Sydney has so many unique areas. Likewise, it cannot be presumed that a complying development will be aesthetic or complimentary to a heritage area.

Consultation and community rights

In a democracy, and in a supposed community consultation, it is important that submissions are closely read, the concerns noted, and that government plans are reviewed in the light of community opinion.

It is also important to retain planning at a local level. Planning at a state level should focus on sustainability, development controls, heritage protection and infrastructure. The role of the state should not be improving the lot for developers and private certifiers, while serially reducing the protest rights of everyday citizens.

This code has the potential to cause community disunity and disputes, and as there appear to be no limits set, could result in serious dilution of the aesthetics of existing low-rise suburbs.

Recommendations

It would be far better that the code is used as a template for councils to adopt minimum standards across NSW while still allowing residents to have a say. Any changes to planning laws must be in the public interest, and taking away people's rights to object to developments in their area, is not in the interest of that community.

The current system of council DA approvals should remain.