The City of Sydney has raised concerns over a New South Wales government plan to redevelop Waterloo Estate with 7,000 dwellings, a scheme that the council says would see the density of Waterloo become the highest in Australia.

Using information publicly released by UrbanGrowth, the NSW government’s urban transformation strategy, the City of Sydney has calculated the dwelling density of the Waterloo Estate redevelopment – part of the Central to Everleigh precinct – to be 368 dwellings per hectare or an estimated 700 people per hectare (70,000 people per square kilometre) according to a City of Sydney council meeting document from 16 May.

"Development at this density over this 19-hectare area is unprecedented in Australia and rare internationally. The existing public domain, including parks and streets, will be intensely impacted and the new development will require significant investment to support amenity and recreation including the provision of large new areas of open space and high quality community infrastructure," the document reads.

The level of dwelling density would make it almost impossible to meet the minimum residential amenity standards set by the NSW government, said Graham Jahn, director of city planning for the City of Sydney. Previously the City of Sydney reviewed a proposal to put 4000 dwellings on the Waterloo Estate site.

"Since we’d already studied it at 4,000 dwellings, we knew that when it shifted to 7,000 dwellings it was going well beyond the capacity of the site to deliver that without significant compromises to amenity standards," Jahn told ArchitectureAU.

Jahn compared the proposal to previous developments including Victoria Park in Zetland, Sydney (130 dwellings per hectare), the former ACI site in Waterloo, Sydney (190 dwellings per hectare), the current Battersea Power Station site in London (214 dwellings per hectare), the Green Square town centre, which is the densest part of the City of Sydney’s Green Square renewal area (235 dwellings per hectare) and the Elephant Park development in London by Lendlease (262 dwellings per hectare).

"The average dwelling density of the Green Square renewal area is about 110 dwellings per hectare. They’re proposing 368, and when you get into these sort of numbers it is extremely sensitive, once you cross a threshold it’s almost impossible because there’s internal self shadowing of the development," Jahn said.
UrbanGrowth has rejected the City of Sydney’s density calculations and says it is confident it can meet the residential amenity standards. Stephen Driscoll, acting head of CBD Projects Portfolio for UrbanGrowth NSW, said it was fallacious for the City of Sydney to present the numbers in kilometres.

“First of all we’re not developing a square kilometre, the public housing estate is less than one fifth of that,” Driscoll said.

“At a conceptual level we’ve tested the more dense portions of the site and yes we believe we can meet those requirements but it won’t be for us to determine that, it’ll be for the City of Sydney and the department of planning to be satisfied on that,” he continued.

Driscoll said previous UrbanGrowth projects such as Victoria Park had been considered to have a high density, but with careful design and sensible location of buildings, the development was a success.

Jahn suggested agencies such as UrbanGrowth should not announce its density target upfront and then try to make it work, but rather develop a scheme driven by amenity standards and then work out how many apartments it can achieve. However Driscoll disagreed, saying announcing numbers did not matter and there will always be people who agree and disagree with change.

Driscoll stressed that the Waterloo Estate plan was only a draft and will need to go through a planning process which the City of Sydney will have a strong say in and the state department of planning will sign off on.

UrbanGrowth’s plans for the greater Waterloo area include a new Metro station, a complete renewal and replacement of all 2,000 social housing units, new parks and community facilities.

The plan will go on public exhibition in several months time.

Words: Louisa Wright
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