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Submission in response to the draft National Urban Policy for Australia

Department of Infrastructure, Transport,
Regional Development, Communications and the Arts
GPO Box 594
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Via email: urbanpolicyinput@infrastructure.gov.au

About Suburban Futures

Suburban Futures is a not-for-profit collaboration of individuals and organisations established to highlight the critical role that Australia's suburbs play in the economy, vibrancy and liveability of the nation.

OUR MISSION:

To promote a better understanding of the important role of the suburban economy in the life of our cities, through shared insights, information and analysis.

OUR VISION:

Progressive cities where quality social and economic infrastructure is equitably distributed across both suburban and inner urban locations.

OUR GOAL:

Equitable quality of life for suburban residents by facilitating greater employment, leisure and retail choices closer to where people live.

For more about our organisation please visit <https://suburbanfutures.com.au/about/>

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Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment on the draft National Urban Policy for Australia.

The draft policy as we read it offers little by way of actionable policy for Australia's metro regions. The goals identified in the draft – liveable; equitable; productive; sustainable and resilient – are all admirable, but in our view lack specifics with respect to measured outcomes.

Rather than comment on the contents of the draft report, Suburban Futures would like to submit that there is a compelling and urgent need to investigate the case for a **national program of suburban and regional renewal**, modelled on the former 'Better Cities' program of the Hawke-Keating era, but with a new geographic emphasis.

THE CASE FOR SUBURBAN & REGIONAL RENEWAL:

After some 30+ years of highly effective inner urban renewal – often with outstanding results – it is time to turn our policy attention and budgets in support of suburban and regional centres, which in this time have received little policy interest and often even less budgetary support.

This submission sets out a compelling case for a concerted focus on the infrastructure needs of middle and outer suburban areas of our capital cities and regional areas.

By applying the lessons learned in inner urban renewal to suburban and regional centres, we stand to create better suburbs and regions for a wider cross section of the community – not just those who live and work in inner city areas.

Such a move:

- **Makes good economic sense:** we will never afford the infrastructure associated with a concentration of employment and urban amenity in just our inner cities. Plus, fast growing industries of the future – especially health and education – are by their nature more inclined to need suitable suburban and regional centres. Supporting organic growth of these future industries in suburban centres is more affordable – and the dollar goes further – in suburban and regional centres.
- **Makes good planning sense.** A mono-centric economy will only exacerbate congestion, worsen housing affordability closer to the centre, and widen the gap between inner-city “haves” and the suburban and regional “have nots.” Plus, many suburban or regional centres are capable of supporting higher concentrations of employment with only modest infrastructure upgrades, as opposed to massively expensive projects associated with inner urban expansion.
- **Is more equitable:** with between 8 and 9 in every 10 people living and working in the suburbs and regions, improvements to their quality of life, economic opportunity and sense of amenity is only fair. Otherwise we risk creating two classes of Australians: those who live and work in inner cities (and who enjoy the best amenities, highest incomes, and wealthiest real estate) and those in the suburbs and regions (who have been missing these opportunities).

A brief history of “urban renewal” and cities policy:

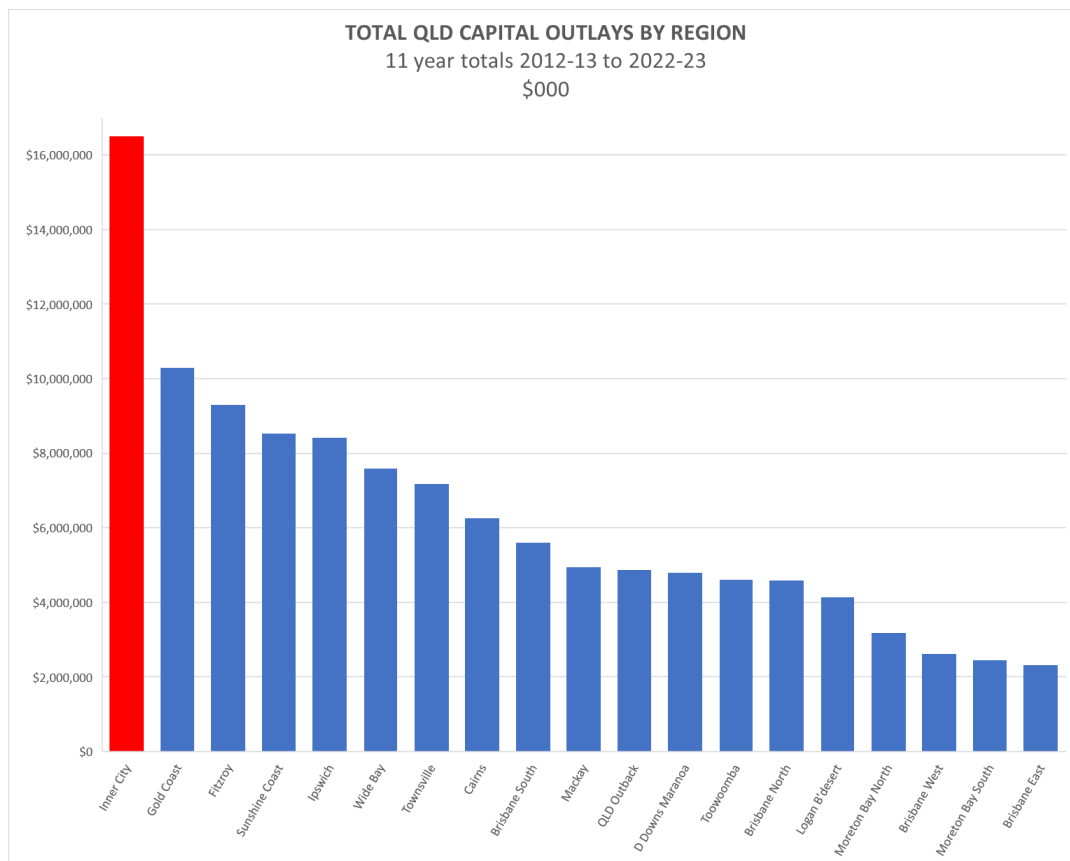
- “Urban renewal” in Australia can be traced to the Better Cities Policy of the Hawke-Keating era, managed under Hon Brian Howe. While not ostensibly focussed exclusively on inner urban renewal projects, the majority of successful projects were inner urban. Typically, they sought to prevent the ‘donut effect’ of hollowed out inner urban areas with under-utilised infrastructure. Over time, these inner-city areas have been the beneficiaries of concentrated public policy and taxpayer support. Many are now prized locations. New Farm, in inner Brisbane, has in 25 years seen its fortunes rocket with a 697% increase in the price of a median home to \$1.625 million – the most expensive suburb in Queensland. Suburban Mount Ommaney in that time (and many like it) increased by just 145%. One in four households in New Farm earned more than \$4,000 per week in 2021. Similar stories have played out in other cities. Inner Sydney Balmain – once a blue-collar workers suburb famously described as a place where “Balmain boys don’t cry” is now home to a very wealthy cohort. The working class cannot hope to afford to live here anymore.
- Supported by city and state governments, “urban renewal” has over time become synonymous with “inner urban” renewal. Likewise, “cities policy” has come to mean “inner city policy.” Meanwhile it has become fashionable in some planning and urban design circles to deride the suburbs. Elizabeth Farrelly (just one example) exclaimed: *“The suburbs are about boredom, and obviously some people like being bored and plain and predictable, I’m happy for them ... even if their suburbs are destroying the world.”* (SMH, June 27, 2013).
- Increasingly, there appears to be what demographer Bernard Salt has dubbed a “goat cheese curtain” of privilege surrounding our inner cities. Corporate elites, media elites, urban planning and academic elites live within this echo-chamber and are rapidly developing a set of shared values which are diverging from mainstream suburbia. **The issue of class and privilege in Australia is fast becoming one not of birthright or inheritance but of geographic location.**

The challenge today:

Inner cities are a focus of infrastructure wish lists championed from within the bubble. Where suburban or regional projects are supported, it is typically on the basis that it supports further concentration of opportunity and employment in the inner city (such as a faster rail from outlying suburban centres so more people can work in the inner city).

Additionally, investments in placemaking, cultural, social and recreational facilities are typically concentrated in inner city areas. Suburban or regional centres seeking access to similar opportunities face a much higher hurdle rate to have their claims supported.

In Queensland, for example, State Government spending in the inner city has vastly outstripped spending in high growth outer suburban areas, or most regional centres. This is despite very obvious infrastructure shortages in high growth outer metro areas, or poorly run down infrastructure in regional centres.



The areas tasked with the greatest growth but which have the highest unemployment or greatest infrastructure deficits receive the least support. Inner city areas of privilege and wealth, which are already abundant in high amenity and quality infrastructure, receive the most support.

Suburban Futures has tried to obtain similar data for other cities, but other state governments do not publish budget data on a geographic basis. We suspect however it would tell a similar story.

There is a concentration of high-end jobs in inner cities. These jobs and their employers are arguably following the infrastructure investment trail, seeking places with most infrastructure support and the best amenity. Little wonder they are not actively pursuing suburban or regional areas given the very limited infrastructure or placemaking support they have received in the same period.

This concentration of high end jobs in inner cities while low skilled or economically vulnerable jobs are in suburban or regional areas is creating a new class divide in Australia – one based on geography.

Planning and urban design professions have also developed an obsession with studying cities inappropriate to the Australian (suburban) model – NYC, Vancouver, Portland, London, Copenhagen etc are frequently touted as exemplars for Australia, often conveniently overlooking chronic affordability issues or social dysfunction. This tends to give this model of economic concentration a false legitimacy. There is little professional interest in studying high growth, affordable cities such as Austin TX, Salt Lake City, Utah etc. The mythology of the emerald city is well entrenched - and financially supported by the Australian taxpayer.

Meanwhile, many suburban and regional centres have not grown nor shared in the benefits of urban renewal due to a lack of investment which stretches across a generation. In some cases, centres have received close to nil public investment in transport infrastructure or

social or economic initiatives in 30+ years. Where growth in the inner city has been supported, suburban and regional centres have largely been left to fend for themselves.

They are consequently showing the evidence of under investment. Their prominence and ability to serve their local community's needs are diminished compared to years past.

But the growth industries of the future – especially health and education – are not typically CBD type industries: they typically by their nature need suburban or regional centres to support their development. We are not laying the groundwork to support their future suburban development and expansion. Nor are we actively exploring opportunities to share the benefits of employment growth related to new industries outside of prosperous inner urban areas. Where are start up hubs typically created with taxpayer support? Not in suburban or regional centres but in CBD office towers. Bill Gates and Steve Jobs started in suburban garages.

The challenge today is to craft a more equitable platform for Australia's future infrastructure and economic development opportunities: one that treats suburban and regional centres as ones of substantial future opportunity, that will benefit greatly from public policy support and taxpayer support. Having been overlooked for so long, it is time to turn our attention to making better suburbs, in order to make better cities.

What a program of suburban renewal offers:

It offers equality of opportunity for the forgotten people of suburban and regional Australia. They are just as entitled as inner-city workers or residents to quality local infrastructure, work and lifestyle opportunities, along with access to first class health and education opportunities. They are not second-class citizens. They should not be expected to accept second class options.

Suburbia is not a condition that needs curing: it should be viewed instead as a means to democratise economic opportunity and to share Australia's wealth more equitably.

Eight in ten of all major metro jobs are not in the inner city – suburban workplaces and suburban centres have equal right to claim policy attention. The vast majority of Australians wake from a suburban bed in a suburban home and travel to a suburban place of work. A program of suburban and regional renewal offers an opportunity to connect with the needs and future economic development opportunities of this majority community of interest.

What is easier to achieve? A 10% growth in the 80% of the workforce that is typically suburban, or an 80% increase in the 10% workforce that is typically inner urban? The opportunities to grow employment in suburban and regional centres are yet to be fully explored. A program of nationwide suburban renewal offers this.

Suburban and regional renewal also offers more “bang for buck”. Several \$500m suburban infrastructure improvement projects will deliver better economic returns to local businesses and professions than single big ticket inner-city projects that run into the billions, where the corporate and delivery beneficiaries are rarely local companies but typically internationals or the ‘big end of town.’

Is a Federal role valid?

Given the majority of the population lives and works in suburban and regional centres, the logic of formally engaging with suburban and regional needs is obvious to all but the most ardent inner city elite.

There is no need for new portfolios. But there is an opportunity to shift “cities policy” from inner cities to suburban and regional areas as priorities.

Relevant transport or related infrastructure projects for suburban and regional renewal are often beyond the means of local government, and sometimes also states, to plan and fund. A Federal program of support and engagement is required.

How would it work?

The simplest answer is to establish a unit within the Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and the Arts, devoted to suburban and regional renewal.

A very substantial forward budget would be required, and offered on a partnership basis to local and state governments where projects or suburban or regional renewal are identified.

The \$11.9 million for a new Cities and Suburbs Unit to deliver on an urban policy agenda; the \$150 million for an Urban Precincts and Partnerships Program; or the \$200 million for a Thriving Suburbs Program to provide investment in community and economic infrastructure are manifestly inadequate relative to the task.

Before committing to specific projects, basic business case benchmarks should be met. These could be developed in conjunction with, or via, Infrastructure Australia.

This has all been done before. Under Hawke-Keating it was called “Building Better Cities.” It can be done again.

Attachments:

Re-thinking SEQ: Suburban Futures’ preliminary submission on revisions to the Southeast Queensland Regional Plan. Suburban Futures. February 2023.

An Income Tale of Two Cities? Making \$ & Sense from the Census. Urban Economics for Suburban Futures. July 2022.