

10 ACTIONS FOR BETTER CONSULTATION

1. Encourage local vitality and engage affected citizens proactively

- ♦ Expand the current urban planning public consultation processes, as they are currently locked into a very narrow model.

Unfortunately, the current model doesn't suit a wide range of people who don't have the time to attend lengthy meetings or read and analyse very lengthy planning documents. Greater ranges of measures should be used to reach out to a wider cross-section of the public.

We believe people are losing interest in the traditional processes of public consultation and becoming cynical about their outcomes. New approaches need to be adopted.

2. Facilitate new approaches to consultation

- ♦ Use improved approaches to entice the public to participate in planning processes, such as:

- **Citizens' panels** – statistically representative to obtain balanced results related to gender, age, ethnic background and occupation, consulted several times a year and supported by independent experts. The State Strategic Plan does not appear to use a statistically valid approach.
- **'Drop-in' sessions.** The Canadian Urban Institute (CUI) uses "drop-in" sessions, where participants see a brief overview presentation and then visit a series of stations that inform them and seek their feedback on key issues.
- **Visual displays** of key planning proposals in strategic locations around the city, e.g. in shopping centres. Such displays around the city would certainly have promoted more debate and interest in the 30-Year Plan for Adelaide.
- **Short regular newsletters, mailings and emails** to balance long planning documents with public information in a more digestible form.
- **Interactive websites and surveys.**

The State Government only encourages citizen involvement near the end of planning processes, e.g. when a draft plan has been prepared.

By this stage the government has usually made up its mind as to which direction it wants to take and so the public consultation process becomes a farce.

The State of Oregon in the USA mandates by law that citizens be involved in all phases of a planning process in addition to describing what has to take place in these various phases and how and when citizens will be involved.

All of the government's major plans being discussed here only provide details about the options it wants to implement, not other options that may be possible.

Technical information behind many key policy directions in the 30-Year Plan (e.g. the densification of development along major arterial roads) is not available and there are even serious doubts about whether appropriate research and analysis was ever undertaken. Not undertaking this research and analysis or hiding it from the public only delays planning processes as the public seeks to obtain more answers to the many questions that have been left unanswered. We know that trust is built when the rationale behind decisions is transparent, defensible, and based on the best information available.

Similarly the levels of research and analysis underpinning the State Strategic Plan and the water plan are also extremely poor.

3. Involve the public in all stages of the planning process

- ♦ Require citizen involvement at the beginning and all phases of urban planning processes

4. Consider all potential options for action, with explanations of outcomes

- ♦ Ensure that any document put out for public consultation evaluates a range of options for action.

5. Ensure professional research, analysis and auditing

- ♦ Ensure that professional research and analysis underpins all planning documents and is available in an understandable form to the public.

6. Mandate from policy makers a process for responses to submissions

- ♦ Ensure appropriate responses to submissions.

In SA, policy makers are not obliged to provide responses to citizens on submissions they may make on planning policy documents. In Oregon they are not only required to provide a response to questions asked, but the rationale behind their decisions to implement certain policies. The value of citizen exchanges needs to be confirmed by feedback about how the input provided has been used.

7. Establish an independently-funded community consultation unit

- ♦ Set up a community consultation unit within State government which is not dominated by government appointees.

8. Restructure planning processes to include hands-on public participation

- ♦ Provide greater emphasis on direct, hands-on, project-oriented public participation in any public consultation exercise.

Public consultation for the 30 Year plan seems to have been a tacked-on process with little time or money allocated. It would seem that the government doesn't have the skills or capacity available to organise and/or run a wide variety of programs to inform the general public about new planning initiatives. A classic example of this is its failure to sell the benefits of transit-oriented development to the general public. As a consequence every locality where a project for transit-oriented development is proposed is likely to become a major battleground between residents and developers over what form development should take.

The consultation process used by the Independent Community Board for the State Strategic Plan has been an improvement but it is a concern that government appointees dominate the Board and that it has skirted around major problems and failed to inform participants about other choices for action and details about relevant research and analysis.

The benefits of public participation are improved understanding of issues, a more comprehensive identification of alternative options, greater understanding of the trade-offs that may be available for each alternative and a greater sense of transparency, accountability and ownership.

9. Make planning processes more transparent and open to public scrutiny

- ♦ Ensure that key stakeholder dealings with the government and local councils on key policy and development decisions are more transparent.

10. Back up these initiatives with appropriate legislation

- ♦ Legislation is essential to ensure that each of the initiatives above is implemented

In SA the normal practice for the government has been to

provide details only about the option it wants implemented and not other options that may be possible.

However the comprehensive evaluation of other options is not only an excellent tool for educating the public about the difficult decisions the government may be confronting, but also provides greater transparency to the way the government operates, thereby creating fewer suspicions in the minds of both the public and experts as to what its real agenda is.

Had the government used this approach with its proposal to develop a new public hospital in Adelaide it is likely that there would have been a much better resolution of the plan. Similarly for the desalination plant, the timber industry, Mt Barker, etc.

People are much more likely to participate when they are engaged in a transparent process. When a project's objectives and timelines are clearly laid out and when participants are made aware of the decisions their input can influence, they are much more willing and able to offer valuable insights that improve decision making.

Dealings behind closed doors with developers over the future growth of the Mount Barker Township has caused irreparable damage to the reputation of the Rann Government and to the credibility of public consultation processes in SA.

No particular lobby group should be granted special privileges when it comes to the opportunities made available to influence the government in its decision-making processes. Instead of working with the development industry behind closed doors the government should be encouraging the development industry to work with other key stakeholders and the general public in community forums.

Pro-development groups like the Development Policy Advisory Committee should be wound up to reduce costs and ensure more equitable influences on the government by all.

It is doubtful whether the above initiatives, if expressed as 'guidelines only', will be properly or effectively implemented.

As with public consultation procedures in Oregon USA, the initiatives need to be backed up by the force of law

DRAFT (May 2011)
for public comment