

Inquiry into the impact of the State Government's decision to change the Urban Growth Boundary

A submission by Friends of Banyule

12th October 2009

Overall, comments in this submission are directed towards the underlying rationale and likely impacts of the changes to the Urban Growth Boundary (UGB), recently announced by the Victorian government.

Key concerns of the Friends of Banyule are:

- That the changes have been based on assumptions about growth in car usage which is inconsistent with other government policies, including the promotion of public transport and significantly increased public transport patronage in recent years which reflect significant changes in attitudes and preference by commuting Melbournians;
- The negative impact of higher volumes of green house gases which will be generated as result of increased car and road transport usage;
- The elevation of traffic densities in outer urban growth areas as well as inner and middle ring suburban corridors with insufficient weight being placed on consequent increased infrastructure spending due to the impact on already congested road network and resulting increased travel times;
- The scope for these increased impacts on infrastructure spending and the budget, to be paid for as a tax on long term landholders, with developers speculating on increased land prices in anticipation of rezoning.
- The changes are inconsistent with Victorian government urban development policy, as enshrined in Melbourne 2030, which sought to limit urban sprawl and protect the quality of the built and natural environment, including the green wedges;
- The continued loss of valuable agricultural land on the urban boundary resulting in more food production being sourced elsewhere with consequent increases in food miles, carbon emissions and higher energy usage;
- The loss of green open space, wildlife corridors and conservation areas in green wedge/urban interface locations which protect significant environmental assets as well as providing highly valuable recreation and leisure zones for residents and the wider community.

Urban development and transport in Melbourne

Whilst projected population growth is the principle justification offered by the Victorian government for the abandonment of the pre-existing UGB, there is significant evidence that ample land exists within these boundaries to cater for foreseeable increases in population. However, it would require an examination of how planning principles contained in Melbourne 2030 have and will now be, applied.

In promoting the proposed expansion of the UGB, the Victorian government also paints a false dichotomy between what it portrays as inner urban privilege and outer urban opportunity. The fact is that residents of the whole of Melbourne, current as well as prospective new arrivals, are at risk if the historical patterns of urban and transport development continue as is contemplated under current policy settings.

Two of the most obvious symptoms of these policy settings are increased car dependency (coupled with rising per capita transport costs) as a consequence of limited public transport access in outer Melbourne and concomitant reductions in liveability in these suburbs as well as in inner suburbs as arterial and freeway road capacity is expanded to meet the growth in road usage.

Recent research by RMIT transport analyst, John Odgers, indicates that recent major expansion of freeway capacity in Melbourne has had no durable impact on relieving road congestion or improving travel time. These findings are unsurprising in the light of the well-established phenomenon of new road development inducing ever-increasing road traffic, especially in the absence of an adequate commitment by government to public transport, cycling and walking strategies.

Negative impacts on the City of Banyule

The consequences of current policy settings for the City of Banyule are especially dire. There is a significant expansion of the UGB proposed north of Craigieburn and south of Wallan. A major ring road is proposed from west of Werribee to east of Broadmeadows. There is some general reference in published Victorian government literature to the use of this corridor for rail freight as well as a major freeway of up to eight lanes. However, there is no specific reference to the provision of extra passenger rail capacity, much less of connecting local public passenger transport capacity. It is of particular concern that there is no announced provision for passenger rail capacity in the reservation south of Craigieburn to its eastern terminating point at the Western Ring Road at the Hume Freeway in Thomastown.

Ominously, this looks very much like “business as usual” with the expansion of the UGB to accommodate additional dormitory suburbs of the type promoted in the 1950’s but now known to be unsustainable. The residents of new suburbs will be exposed to significant rates of car dependency, negative environmental consequences and diminution in disposable household income as a consequence of being compelled to operate additional cars in order to maintain acceptable levels of mobility.

3.

There is some evidence of an increase in the take-up of public transport in Banyule in recent years, as it has burgeoned elsewhere in Melbourne. However, available data suggests it has been relatively modest and that to maintain urban liveability as well as the quality of the built and the natural environment it needs to increase much more than it has.

Between 2006/07 and 2007/08 route bus trips on services provided in Banyule increased by only 4.7%. According to the 2006 Census, of 55,628 resident workforce participants in Banyule, a mere 337 made connecting bus/ rail trips to work on census day. These data suggest significant weaknesses in the route bus services in the area and their connectivity with the heavy rail system, especially the Hurstbridge line.

Public transport to serve Banyule and surrounding municipalities to the north and the east is especially poor. For instance, it is estimated that about 45-50,000 motor vehicles enter Melbourne Airport each day, to the north of Banyule. These numbers are growing. As a single destination, this is commensurate with daily traffic volumes on some of our most heavily trafficked freeways.

However, there are only three route bus services that service the airport, each with limited service availability. None of these provide services for Banyule residents. In keeping with many other growing cities with poorly designed public transport systems, the residents of Banyule are obliged to access the airport and other northern and southern destinations via the CBD “hub” rather than travel directly to their destination. The result is steadily increasing road traffic congestion in Banyule and surrounding municipalities.

With the overlay of current transport policy settings the consequences of the anticipated expansion of the UGB in the north and west of Melbourne, in particular, are very troubling indeed.

Conclusions

The expansion of the UGB is predicated on very questionable modelling of the capacity of the existing greater Melbourne metropolitan area to absorb likely increases in population (levels of increases are necessarily, the subject of further debate/ discussion).

Changes to the UGB and the foreshadowed approach to urban planning and transport infrastructure by the Victorian government will exacerbate ongoing negative trends in the development of Melbourne. The new outer metropolitan suburbs which will be created on the urban fringe will be highly car dependent and middle and inner suburbs will also suffer higher levels of road traffic as a consequence.

4.

This is redolent of the decisions of previous Victorian governments who in the 1950's and 1960's opened areas on the urban fringe for the expansion of Melbourne to cater for what they described as "excess" population. They did so without any regard for the provision of local employment and the development of adequate local infrastructure and services. We are still living with the negative consequences of this short-sightedness. More recently, the concerns of placing further housing development on the urban fringe with increased risk of bushfires such as experienced on February 7th this year, as a result of climate change, is a further matter which should be factored into future urban planning.

Given the major external costs associated with increased road traffic, which remain largely unaccounted for, there will inevitably be heavy calls on State capital funding resources that would be much better spent elsewhere.

There are far better urban development and transport models elsewhere, including Perth, WA, where the recently opened Mandurah rail line to the south of Perth is effecting major modal shift in transport behaviour in new suburbs. This is a good example of how relevant and forward looking public transport solutions can be built quickly at a fraction of the cost of the proposed North – East Freeway link, planned to be built through Banyule.

It can only be done if there is sufficient political will and a clear vision for the future, rather than the back to the past, outmoded response which is reflected in the expanded UGB with associated construction of more roads and freeways and loss of green open space, which this will inevitably involve.

Friends of Banyule Inc.

Mail: PO Box 577 Heidelberg Vic 3084

Email: info@friendsofbanyule.org

Web: www.friendsofbanyule.org

Contacts for Submission:

Marion Ware

President

(m): 0413 41 88 32

Dennis O'Connell

Committee Member

Email: dennisoc@bigpond.net.au

(h) 9439 3175

(m) 0409 184 926

