

SUBMISSION TO, 'PLANNING SYSTEM IMPLEMENTATION REVIEW'

DECEMBER 2022

I appreciate the opportunity to express my views to the Expert Panel particularly on Tree Policy, which I consider integral to a civilised environment. I am a long-term resident and property owner in Joslin 5070, some 34 years. It might be useful to state briefly my relevant interests and skills, such as they are.

All my working life was as an academic economist at the University of Adelaide, 1967-2017 where I was a Senior Lecturer and twice Head of Department. My area of interest was micro-economics and I taught at all levels, first year to fourth year Honours, and supervised post-graduates including PhDs. This means that I am familiar at least with the theory of externalities, that is public or collective goods; those goods that lie in part or wholly outside conventional markets. Trees by their very nature are such. The benefits and costs of trees are inevitably not wholly private or if you like, within conventional markets. This is a problem, where we tend to rely on markets for resource allocation, a problem increasingly recognised both in theory and in policy. Put simply, a mature tree provides benefits both to its owners and its non-owners and 'similarly' imposes costs on its owner and non-owners. I say 'similarly', but not equally, since each case is almost unique both in the nature of these costs and benefits and their magnitude.

By chance my lifelong interests include an interest in nature, particularly, but not solely birds. As such I have been a member for 55 years of Birds SA (more formally the South Australian Ornithological Association). This organization is over 120 years old and currently has over 1,000 members. I have been President, Vice-President and on the Committee for most of the past 55 years. I am not a professional ecologist, but feel that I know something in general about the ecological role of vegetation and trees, and their social value.

I found the fourteen 'Questions to Guide Your Feedback' very helpful and will address some of these issues and perhaps some others if I may.

It is often difficult to define a valid and useful metric. For 'urban trees' it is apparently 'tree canopy cover' and this would seem appropriate and measurable. It does raise many problems since trees are not in any sense homogenous, by species, size etc. One very contentious issue concerns Native v Non-native. Indeed, 'Native' is itself ambiguous; 'native' to where, the State, the local area, the country? Further, in a highly man-made urban environment, it is not always clear that 'Native', even if defined, is optimal. Sometimes 'Non-native' trees can be relevant, even if they do not appeal to the purist! (I know of two native bird species which consistently inhabit and seem to prefer non-native vegetation across the highly modified urban environment in Adelaide.)

I have not addressed several of the 14 questions ('issues') mentioned in the Review document that I have to hand. Instead, given my background and interests, I have discussed what I consider to be the fundamental basis of the problem; a systematic divergence between net private benefit and net public benefit in urban areas, from development and by inference removal of trees and/or often, not planting trees. While this exists, canopy will tend to over-decline as it does all round the world mainly on privately owned land. Of course, as has been noted, public land plantings can often counter this tendency, but cannot in general fully compensate for it. In addition, public land plantings often have other constraints and disadvantages. There is no doubt that 'protection', 'distance from Development' and even 'off-set' rules can help, but all are inevitably subject to difficulties of measurement, judgement, legal niceties etc. I wish that I could be more positive, but the market and market forces are very powerful and few individuals can afford to ignore the lure of large private monetary gain in order to add often minimally, in the case of each individual, to a large often huge public net gain by not developing. The same problem applies to many areas and is a form of free-riding. It is a form of 'market failure', a well-known concept in economics, but probably less so among the public at large.

The remedies mentioned mostly have some merit, but cannot easily control or mitigate significantly the fundamental issue. Urban consolidation offers large short-term gains to some at the expense of widespread small (often unperceived) long-term gains to many; not a good equation! Often the problem is not the regulation itself, but the pressure to avoid applying or monitoring its application. The tendency is for a small number of net gainers (often with large short-term gains) to dominate a large number of net losers (often with small or time distant gains). Crudely, intensity of interest dominates extensiveness. This applies to many other important social issues.

To be more positive it means that regulations need to be rigorously imposed and monitored. In this context this might require relatively expensive resources in assessing individual cases and/or resource expensive monitoring and penalty application for breaches. These tend to be unpopular and cumbersome compared with market forces, prices.

A particular problem with trees is that they are mostly a long-term 'investment' literally, and in a more ecological sense. A mature tree is a different asset from a recent replant (and/or replacement). Indeed, in many cases they increase in value rather than depreciate over much of a long-life; both for ecological and societal reasons!

Dr John Hatch

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