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Expert Panel  
Planning System Implementation Review  
GPO Box 1815  
Adelaide, SA 5001

## Planning System Implementation Review - Submission

I am writing to express a number of concerns with the new planning system that has been progressively introduced over the past few years. By way of introduction, I was closely involved with the expert panel for planning reform when it was conducting its work in 2013-14. Its key focus was on improving system outcomes whilst ensuring that members of the community would be involved in the crafting of policy and would, as a result, be less interested in contesting individual development applications that aligned with that policy. It would be fair to say, on the basis of the performance of the new system and the numerous discussions I have since had with members of the expert panel, that this objective has never been met. Many of the developments proposed since introduction of the new system have encountered considerable community resistance and angst, evidenced in part by the demise of local members of parliament in both the Adelaide and Norwood/St Peters electorates.

It is also agonisingly apparent that community members unfamiliar with the planning system have found it difficult and extremely frustrating using the planning portal to lodge development applications despite the intent to make that process a whole lot simpler.

In relation to the current Planning System Implementation Review, I understand that the Minister for Planning has indicated that this should be based on evidence of the experience of people using the system. This implies that he is looking to introduce relatively minor changes to the system as it is currently constituted, rather than engage in any serious re-think of the system and its performance.

However, I strongly believe, on the basis of my 35 years' experience of the planning system in South Australia, that the current system is fatally flawed and no longer has the capacity to deliver the strategic objectives expressed in the various volumes of the Planning Strategy (existing and forthcoming). I make this claim on the basis of the following issues:

### 1. **Planning policy (i.e., the Planning and Design Code) that fails to recognise spatial difference**

At the heart of any reputable planning system is the recognition that all sites are different by virtue of their location, and that good planning policy should reflect the specific spatial characteristics of sites in order for development to be sustainable and make a positive contribution to the amenity and economy of places. The Planning and Design Code (PDC) effectively universalises planning policy so that the same policy levers apply to virtually ALL residential, commercial, industrial and mixed use developments, no matter where they are located. In so doing, the PDC effectively 'rips the heart' out of spatial planning and risks reducing our urban and regional environments to sterile, unimaginative places that are bereft of character and all look the same.

Witness the development outcomes subject to **Urban Corridor** zone requirements along Anzac Highway and other major corridors across metropolitan Adelaide. While the policy seeks to enhance opportunities to activate the street, most residential developments in these locations 'turn their back' on the street and create impermeable, heat-loading spaces that are centred around accommodating motor vehicles. My experience of assessing these developments in the City of West Torrens evidences a reluctance amongst



developers to change their designs of higher density residential flat buildings and townhouses to properly address the street and suit the site, primarily for reasons of economic gain. Instead, the ‘on-balance’ assessment mantra together with uniform policy prescriptions in these locations allows developers to maximise the amount of land given over to hard surfaces with little consideration or care for the amenity of the space or of its future residents. During my time as assessment manager in the City of West Torrens, I assessed dozens of residential developments in corridor zones with the overwhelming majority of these devoting well over 50% of the site area for accommodating motor vehicles, with significant implications for stormwater disposal, tree canopy cover and the associated use of power-hungry air conditioning! At a time when climate change events are becoming increasingly dangerous for urban and regional residents, these kinds of developments are quite simply unsustainable and seriously threaten the liveability of the State’s urban and regional areas.

The only beneficiary of uniform planning policy that the PDC prescribes is the development sector. Developers can now place their standard designs on almost any site irrespective of where it is located and with little, if any, consideration of the specific spatial characteristics of that site. For this reason, I would argue that the PDC is neither a planning nor design framework. It is simply a development framework that effectively eliminates the consideration of important planning and design matters that should be factored into every development and every assessment.

## 2. Planning policy that fails to deliver strategic objectives

A key characteristic of the South Australian planning system that has been celebrated and lauded both nationally and internationally is the clear line of sight between:

- **Strategy** – i.e., the strategic objectives expressed in the Planning Strategy;
- **Policy** – i.e., the policies applicable in particular locations that are intended to deliver strategic objectives; and
- **Assessment** – i.e., the assessment of development proposals against policy that enables the delivery of strategic objectives.

Given the uniformity of policy expressed in the PDC, it is little wonder that the line of sight between strategy-policy-assessment has broken down, which risks paralysing any attempt to meet South Australia’s strategic planning objectives. Interestingly, it was precisely this feature of the previous planning system that saw this State adjudged by the COAG Reform Council to have the finest planning system of all Australian jurisdictions as recently as 2012.

For the planning system to operate for ALL South Australians, it is imperative that the strategic planning objectives established by government (local and state) and the community (as constituted by a diverse range of interest groups and citizens) are delivered by a robust set of policies that have been developed specifically to meet those objectives. This requires much more than a development framework. It is also imperative that planning assessment decisions are based on agreed strategic objectives. Again, this requires policy that goes beyond a uniform development framework.

While I acknowledge the enormous amount of work undertaken by department staff to rationalise development plan policy and remove unnecessary repetition, a further level of strategic analysis and engagement was required to ensure the spatial applicability of PDC policy in meeting the State’s strategic planning objectives. This additional work was never undertaken and has necessitated ongoing incremental policy changes that have been recently (and hastily) introduced by the State Planning Commission (SPC) to address a number of deficiencies in the PDC. Such incremental responses, often referred to as ‘opportunities’ in the SPC’s discourse, are a sign that we have lost our strategic and forward-thinking focus.



### 3. Planning policy that fails to achieve integration with the transport system

The PDC is largely silent on providing for the integration of the land use planning system with the transport system. There are no policies directed towards encouraging and enabling active travel (such as cycling, walking, public transport and other micro-mobility modes) despite the significant health, social, environmental and economic benefits derived from such modes. The 'Capital City', 'Business Neighbourhood' and 'City Main Street' Zones – all of which are key destinations in our cities and regions – are all predicated on motorised vehicular access with no policies providing for either public transport access/integration or safe pedestrian and cycle access. There is currently only one zone – the 'Urban Activity Centre' Zone – that pays lip-service to supporting integration with public transport facilities. However, the policy wording is so generalist that developers have few requirements to provide facilities and connections that enable such integration, especially given the 'on-balance' assessment mantra noted above.

Unless the South Australian Government wants to continue its current trajectory of enhancing car-based mobility and increasing the car-dependency of the urban population, it should be introducing a suite of policy levers into the PDC that encourages and enables people to adopt active travel modes. And given the significance accorded to creating compact, sustainable and liveable urban environments in the 30 Year Plan for Greater Adelaide, it is imperative that the PDC includes specific and minimum requirements for pedestrian, cyclist and public transport access, comprehensive footpath provision, comprehensive bicycle connections, and appropriately located bike parking at all new developments, not just those in designated areas. Quite simply, developments likely to require above-average public transport access (such as shopping centres, hospitals, aged citizens' homes and sports/entertainment arenas) should not be approved unless access by active travel modes is made available and provides an attractive alternative to vehicular access.

Curiously, or perhaps predictably, the five new transport overlays recently introduced into the PDC focus on facilitating and supporting road projects and unnecessary intersection upgrades. As a result, planning policy in this State is geared entirely towards supporting motor vehicular travel and providing for excessive amounts of land to be devoted to heat-loading car parks. The outcomes of this policy bias in the PDC are diametrically opposed to the State's strategic planning objectives to enhance sustainable mobility. For these reasons, I would strongly argue that the five new transport overlays ought to be removed as their continued use will fundamentally destroy the liveability of metropolitan Adelaide and other major regional centres across the State.

### 4. Ongoing incremental changes to patch up a flawed system

Mention has already been made of the changes made to the system/PDC by the SPC in recent times. While this may suggest that the system has some flexibility to respond to changing circumstances, the very fact that these changes have been introduced so soon after the PDC's introduction indicates that the development of policy has been overly hasty and has failed to properly address some important planning matters.

It is worth noting that the emergence and establishment of strategic planning in every Australian jurisdiction during the late 1980s and early 1990s was a direct response to the negative impacts of incremental planning. Chief amongst these impacts was a failure of planning mechanisms to adequately respond to the rapid changes occurring in our metropolitan areas and to changing community expectations. I would argue that we are currently facing a similar, albeit more hazardous, period of rapid change as we adapt to climate change and the problems this presents for future development, principal



amongst these being the transition away from fossil fuels and the onset of increasingly volatile weather patterns.

Clearly, we will need up-to-date and innovative policy solutions to these issues. By simply consolidating development plan policy established decades ago in some cases, the PDC is totally inadequate and will not provide South Australians with the capacity to either mitigate or adapt to the challenges now presented by a rapidly changing climate.

## Summary

In summary, I strongly believe that the planning system and, more specifically the PDC, needs to be completely re-thought. In denying the significance of spatial difference, the system is allowing the development sector to construct unsustainable developments that negatively affect occupants, their neighbours, the surrounding locality and the planet more generally. We can, and should be doing a lot better!

I would be more than happy to discuss these matters at length with the review panel should this be desired. At the very least, I would encourage panel members to visit recently developed sites that have been assessed against the PDC to observe development outcomes and consider whether these developments:

- make a positive contribution to the liveability of our urban and regional environments;
- assist in making our urban and regional environments more resilient to the impacts of climate change events of the sort recently experienced in Adelaide and, more alarmingly, across the eastern seaboard; and
- enable development to be integrated with public transport to provide opportunities for people to adopt a range of different, more sustainable transport modes.

Sincerely



Dr Donna Ferretti; RPIA (Life Fellow).