



3 October 2016

Submission to the Productivity Commission

BETTER URBAN PLANNING

The Urban Design Forum (UDF) is pleased to be able to comment on the Productivity Commission's draft document "Better Urban Planning" (Aug 2016).

UDF is a volunteer organisation, and is not resourced sufficiently to make a comprehensive response to all of the Commission's findings and recommendations. In general, however, we broadly support the Auckland Council's submission to the Commission.

We would like to emphasise the following points, some of which we made in our earlier submission (March 2016).

The questions posed by the Commission are generally very specific, and will be best answered by those with specific knowledge. We consider our comments are best arranged around the points made by the Commission in section 13.5 of the draft document :

What changes are needed? (page 332)

CLEARER DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN THE BUILT AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

We agree with Auckland Council that the natural environment is important in the consideration of urban development, and that the two cannot be disentangled. The presumption of environmental protection should apply in urban areas, but with an overlay provided by the proposed GPS on the urban environment which, as the Commission says, "would clearly outline the relationship between the two". While there have been suggestions within UDF that a completely new urban planning act is the way forward, on balance we consider the energy available for planning reform should be applied to the points below rather than massive legislative change.

GREATER PRIORITISATION

UDF agrees that a greater degree of guidance via national policy is required in the planning system, and suggests that this can be provided within the current framework via National Policy Statements and other mechanisms. The Commission's observation regarding the success of setting priorities on land transport matters is interesting, but we note that that this process is driven by central government, and mostly funded by them. The relevance of this example to the Commission's ideas on a more responsive, market driven allocation of land uses is unclear.

MORE RESPONSIVE INFRASTRUCTURE PROVISION

New developments and their communities generally prosper more quickly where public transport, schools and libraries/community centres are established concurrent with the growth of the community and where they are supported by a robust infrastructure of water services and roads. Ideally, the full range of infrastructure will be at least slightly ahead of community growth.



A Lack of responsiveness in this area is usually tied to a simple shortage of funding rather than any systemic planning failure.

A MORE RESTRAINED APPROACH TO LAND USE REGULATION

UDF is not opposed to broader zones that allow multiple uses (the Auckland Council’s Business Mixed Use zone, for instance, has worked well for many years), but does not support the general thrust of the Commission’s comment that rules should only be applied where other approaches (presumably pricing and market-based tools) are not feasible. We agree with the view of Auckland Council that pricing and markets are volatile, and trying to respond in pre-ordained ways to such signals is likely to lead to significant uncertainty which will unsettle both the development community, and the wider community. The costs involved in switching resources around trying to respond to market signals will become wasteful.

STRONGER CAPABILITIES WITHIN COUNCILS AND CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

UDF strongly supports the Commission’s statement here. We consider that developing a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of what makes successful cities is essential at all levels of government. This is more likely to be a national agency set up to support and educate local government, rather than the suggested permanent Independent Hearings Panel, which would add yet another legal layer to the planning system.

In conclusion, UDF agrees with much of the analysis in the draft document, but does not support one of the main underlying themes: that an active design of the future city is, at best wasteful and, at worst, harmful. As noted above, the most significant driver of urban form is the design of infrastructure, and this is necessarily ‘designed’ by a few providers in advance of free-market development. This is not to say that infrastructure design happens in a vacuum, ignoring market conditions, but it is nonetheless carried out with some vision of the future city in mind. It is essential this process is based on best practice, good research and robust testing.

The draft document ignores the role of design in urban development, whereas UDF considers that cities that have embraced the role of design in their development, such as Melbourne and Vancouver which lead the global lists of liveable cities, have benefitted economically and socially from doing so.

We suggest a conversation with the Hobsonville Land Company will demonstrate how design has added huge economic and social value to that community.

The process there has incorporated these features:

- Early provision of infrastructure, including schools by central government, public transport by Auckland Council, and underground services, parks and community facilities by HLC,
- A highly prescriptive code for the design of dwellings at medium densities,
- Value uplift capture for the benefit of the original landowner – the government – for the public good.



- Comprehensive design review of all development proposals to maintain a consistent 'look and feel', and enhance value.
- Incorporation of the design review process into the RMA approval process to speed up approvals
- A flexibility of zone heights to allow for the increasing numbers of apartment proposals coming on-stream.

For obvious reasons, the Hobsonville model cannot be simply replicated as part of a nation-wide planning system, but we consider there are some important learnings to be derived from their experience that do not appear in the draft document, particularly in the area of peer design review.

UDF supports the suggestions that the early provision of infrastructure, including public transport, could be funded via mechanisms that capture land value up-lift as a result of rezoning, and road-user pricing.

We will be pleased to meet with the Commission to expand on these points if requested.

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The Urban Design Forum NZ promotes good urban design in New Zealand.

UDF partners are the Planning, Landscape, Architecture, Engineering and Surveying Institutes.

UDF is modelled on similar groups in Australia and England.

The purpose of UDF is to:

- promote cross-disciplinary understanding of urban design amongst urban professionals;
- raise awareness of the benefits of urban design at both national and local levels;
- provide a forum for discussion of design-based approaches that are relevant to the development and management of New Zealand towns and cities.

Membership is open to anyone interested in urban design and includes planners, architects, landscape architects, engineers, surveyors and other professionals, together with politicians, academics, developers and individuals.

The organisation is overseen by an elected National Committee who provide their service on a voluntary basis.