Coordinated and sequenced growth area development

Transport Options in New Suburbs Policy Brief

This policy brief presents the outcomes from an RMIT study into the transport provision in Melbourne's growth areas to inform policy stakeholders on approaches to early delivery of transport infrastructure and service provision in new suburbs.

Key Recommendations

While increased funding is a key element, there also needs to be better coordination of provision, more efficient planning processes, and the delivery of supporting land uses.

- Develop strategic transport plans to inform planning for growth areas.
- Introduce staged public and active transport provision, ensuring a basic level of provision at the commencement of settlement and then stepping up as development milestones are met.
- Ensure the early delivery of neighbourhood and/or town centres to encourage active transport and provide a place for community activity.
- Increase average net density targets for growth suburbs in the PSP Guidelines to at least 25 dwellings per net developable hectare.

Background

Inadequate and delayed delivery of transport infrastructure and services is a major challenge in new and developing greenfield suburbs. To understand how the planning process for transport in growth areas can be improved, RMIT researchers undertook a study into transport provision in Melbourne's growth areas in partnership with the Cities of Casey and Wyndham, property developer Stockland Australia and the Planning Institute Australia (Victorian Division), and in consultation with the Victorian Planning Authority and the Department of Transport. This study involved an analysis of the growth area planning process informed by a document analysis and interviews with 30 staff from Victorian state government departments and agencies, local government, developers and consultants involved in growth area planning.[1]

Plan for sequenced infrastructure development

Precinct Structure Planning (PSP) and the corresponding PSP Guidelines under the direction of the Victorian Planning Authority (VPA) provide a common approach to planning for Melbourne's growth areas, and this has improved coordination considerably. Yet, the subsequent provision of infrastructure and services is outside of the VPA's authority and delivery of state infrastructure and operational expenditure is often politicised and contested. Improvements are needed for greater collaboration and integrated thinking in growth area planning. A whole-of-government approach to integrated growth area planning would be better supported by a single coordinating agency that has authority over infrastructure and service provision in growth areas.

A public strategic plan for the timing and delivery of growth area infrastructure would give developers and residents confidence, and enable local councils to match their funding and local infrastructure development to achieve beneficial outcomes. Similarly, Precinct Structure Plans (PSPs), even though locally focused, could be better coordinated with regional infrastructure if the timing for infrastructure delivery were known in advance.

Commitment to a strategic approach would be beneficial for coordinating sequencing of development. This is important, as our research shows that sequencing of development can utilise benefits of increased transport provision, including amplified benefits from effects on surrounding suburbs[2]. Thus, better coordinated and sequenced planning reduces car dependency, improves liveability and health outcomes.

Introduce staged public transport provision

An integrated transport plan, or set of regional transport plans, would contribute to a more strategic planning approach for new growth areas and increase confidence in delivery. The City of Calgary in Canada adopted an approach with staged public transport provision, including 'Introductory Transit' to be rolled out in areas which previously had no public transport. A defined minimum level of public transport services gives assurance to residents, developers, retailers and other service providers that at least some form of public transport will be available.

Options for such a specified minimum service can include standard services, on-demand services or an integration with community transport. Developers could also be involved through providing shuttle buses as work-in-kind.

> **The City of Calgary in Canada has a staged public transport provision that progresses from Introductory Transit, Base Transit, Frequent Transit, and establishment of the Primary Transit Network. The city specifies how Introductory Transit is rolled out in areas which have no public transport service, such as growth areas. Once thresholds are met for population or job numbers, public transport is provided in new areas according to a minimum standard.**

A basic level of public transport should be provided as soon as the first residents move in to growth area developments. Even though providing a minimum level of service would initially incur higher costs due to low utilisation, it helps avoid car dependency. Once entrenched, car dependency impacts upon road congestion and reduces uptake of alternative transport options, from which residents and society ultimately incur greater economic and health costs. Public transport should be regarded as an essential infrastructure service along with electricity, water, and roads, and needs to be provided concurrent with urban development. A minimum level of transport would be made more viable by ensuring more concentrated and timely development, which is enabled by better sequencing.

Prioritise accessibility to destinations

The uptake of active transport such as walking or cycling requires the establishment of 'destinations'. This is acknowledged in Plan Melbourne's 20-minute neighbourhood concept, which aims to provide people with access to everyday needs such as shopping, health services, libraries and childcare facilities within a 20-minute return walk from their home[3]. To achieve this aim, there is a need to build some early destinations in new growth areas. Developers have expressed interest in coordinating with other stakeholders to provide some early delivery of smaller hubs in their estates. This can for example be the combination of the display centre with a café, convenience store or a childcare centre. Other approaches could include establishing village shops or cooperatives (as in some rural areas), or mobile services and markets that come on specific days.

Early delivery to overcome the 'chicken and egg' issue of densities and viability

Early delivery of public transport and a neighbourhood retail centre can support the provision of higher densities, which in turn make public transport more viable and support walkability, so that a synergy can emerge. The new Draft PSP Guidelines increase targeted dwelling densities from the current Guidelines to an average of at least 20 dwellings per Net Developable Hectare, though this still falls short of densities recommended by research of at least 25 net dwellings per hectare[4]. Cooperation with local councils as to where to achieve higher densities is of high importance, as they prepare local strategic plans. Good urban design is essential in the public realm to make medium density living attractive.

For further information:
cur.org.au/project/equitable-healthy-transport-options-new-suburbs/

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[1] For further details on the study methods and results see Kroen, A.; Goodman, R.; Gunn, L.; Pemberton, S. (2021) Early delivery of equitable and healthy transport options in new suburbs – Final report. RMIT Melbourne, as well as Kroen, A.; Taylor, E.; Goodman, R. (2018), Precinct Structure Planning in Melbourne's Growth Areas: Initial Thoughts on Processes and Trade-offs. Internal Working Paper, Centre for Urban Research, Melbourne.

[2] For further details see Kroen, A.; Goodman, R.; Gunn, L.; Pemberton, S. (2021) Early delivery of equitable and healthy transport options in new suburbs – Final report. RMIT Melbourne, as well as Gunn, L.; Pemberton, S.; Kroen, A.; Goodman R. (2021) Benefits and costs of early delivery of transport options in new suburbs. Internal Working Paper, Centre for Urban Research, Melbourne.

[3] Department of Environment Land, Water & Planning (2021) 20-minute neighbourhoods. Available under: https://www.planning.vic.gov.au/policy-and-strategy/planning-for-melbourne/plan-melbourne/20-minute-neighbourhoods Last accessed 21 July 2021.

[4] The VPA issued draft revised guidelines (PSP 2.0) in September 2020 which are expected to be finalised in August 2021. Relevant academic references include: Boulange, C.; Gunn, L.; Giles-Corti, B.; Mavoa, S.; Pettit, C.; Badland, H. (2017): "Examining associations between urban design attributes and transport mode choice for walking, cycling, public transport and private motor vehicle trips". Journal of Transport & Health 6. Pp. 155–166, and Giles-Corti, B.; Hooper, P.; Foster, S.; Koohsari, M. J.; Francis, J. (2014) Low density development: Impacts on physical activity and associated health outcomes. Melbourne, Victoria: Heart Foundation (Victorian Division).

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