

PROPERTY

Planners look to local government for action

By CHRISTOPHER JAY

WITH the Federal Government Department of Environment, Housing and Community Development (formerly DURD) pulling

in its horns, the town planning profession is increasingly looking to local government for planning decisions and an expanded role in long-term manage-

ment decisions for local communities.

This attitude among the planning profession fits in with avowed Government intentions in NSW at least, where the State Government is attempting to decentralise a lot of planning decisions.

With a succession of green, blue and white books, the NSW State Planning and Environment Commission has communicated its desire to lift its skirts out of the details on local planning appeals and argument between councils, developers and local residents.

However, if local councils are to provide better planning for and management of local communities, there are two necessary corollaries:

- State Governments need to have more forward planning on major issues which affect local communities — such as routes for rail link extensions in Sydney's outer areas, or timing of other public works programs.

- Local councils need to have management structures geared to implementing a series of sustained, co-ordinated decisions and works programs which can only produce results over a period of time.

"The whole emphasis of the planning process has been changed to management by objectives," says consultant planner George Clarke, of Urban Systems Corporation.

"This takes the whole thing further and further away from merely physical planning. If you write about problems, you're writing about individual matters which can't be solved in isolation.

"Whenever we approach a system, such as a municipality or a city, we find time and time again when we try to tackle a particular problem, like traffic or stream pollution in the Blue Mountains, we find that everything's connected and you can't solve individual problems in isolation.

"We find that the traditional structures of government, the way administrations are broken down into treasuries, or engineering, or clerical, just doesn't cope.

"So unless the big systems are approached with a new urban management approach, the only things which can be done are these tiny cosmetic approaches, with things done by small groups of people.

"The NSW Public Transport

Government is now trying to cut down the production of paper.

"We need a kind of very short, succinct, action-oriented specification of steps that need to be done.

"The whole concept of corporate planning is that you have some overall objectives for the next three years, and then you have shortterm action priorities.

"We've got to return to the original concept, management by shortterm action priorities.

"With municipal Government, we get down to the system by which the loan estimates are arrived at, often with short conversations at the last moment.

"There's very little continuity in thinking, and the council officers, lacking any written down management plan, are unable to control shortterm variations in objectives.

"Some areas are so bedevilled by the history of past actions and decisions, that there is a paralysis of major decision-making.

"You'd have to distinguish between relatively simple-to-manage places like Wagga, where it is possible to make major decisions and carry them through intelligently, and municipalities with complex involvement of various interests."

Particularly with councils in metropolitan areas, the number of different authorities involved in an area, including all the State functional authorities and a lot of Federal ones, such as the PMG, complicates the task of the local council.

As a result, the actual features and character of a neighbourhood are usually determined by:

- The status quo effect. Strategic decisions are not taken, as a result of which traffic jams and noise increase, air quality deteriorates, people continue to put up with inadequate facilities, and there is a gradation of residential quality in various areas, with better off people concentrating in the more attractive areas and defending their residential quality through resident action groups and local influence.

- The piecemeal decision approach, by which the character of any area is gradually altered through the piecemeal decisions of private interests — such as a computer-aided decision to build a shopping mall, or selection of a site for home unit development.

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Commission repaints its carriages blue and white.

"No matter how many staff or consultants you have, you can't make decisions about whether you should concentrate on extending primary treatment for sewerage to control the worst pollution, or whether you should try to have more tertiary treatment plants in more populated areas, without running into five or six other problems.

"They're intractable in isolation, and in the short term. They will only yield to sustained management.

"The only solution I've found is a kind of management kit which sets out broad objectives, defines the major policies, and then sets out a work program with actions to be taken on a broad front, and in co-ordination with other activities.

"You have to start with step one. Step one, the sine qua non, is the formation of a capital staff budgeting committee.

"Urban governance and management in Australia is bedevilled by the production of voluminous reports full of data and speculation, and in the last three years increasingly full of vague waffle.

"No-one over the level of junior management has time to read these. The Federal

- The force majeure effect, by which development is determined by the date at which a major instrumentality, such as the Water Board, is disposed to provide essential services.

- The formula model, by which the pattern of private development is controlled by the application of arbitrary formulas, inherited from England and having much the same status in planning circles as the Ten Commandments, only with more clauses.

According to George Clarke, local government could be used to provide a more integrated, effective approach to co-ordinating a whole series of decisions which have to be related and analysed to establish priorities.

"It's the only level of government that tries to integrate within one defined geographical area the effects of all partial systems," he says.

"It's often thought that it's the role of the States or Federal Government to co-ordinate, but the local government area has an equally awesome task to do in co-ordination.

"It's the only level of government that is directly concerned with the overall physical, environmental quality of life in a particular area."