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Federal Member for Wills

Victorian National Parks Association - Grassland Community Day
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I congratulate the Victorian National Parks Association for putting this day together and I congratulate other groups who are represented here also. I am pleased to have the opportunity to explain to you why I am strongly opposed to the State Government's plan to extend the Urban Growth Boundary.

First, European settlement has led to the destruction of over 95% of Victoria's original native grassland. Less than 5% remains. I got interested in conservation issues when I was a kid, and they are what got me interested in politics in the first place. At the time, back in the 1970s, I was a small part of the formation of the modern conservation movement; an awakening of environmental awareness. While environment battles were always hard, I had the reasonably optimistic view that people were becoming more enlightened about the environment, more willing to protect it, and prepared to learn from the mistakes of the past.

But under that rosy view surely communities and governments would not entertain the thought of hoeing into any of the less than 5% grassland which we have left. Surely it is indecently, barbarically, greedy to propose that any more grassland be lost. Yet that is what is proposed.

The State Government's proposal gives the green light to property developers to clear nearly 7000 hectares of critically endangered volcanic plains grassland, and nearly 1000 hectares of grassy woodland – almost 8000 hectares of some of the most endangered habitats in Victoria. These losses are proposed to be 'offset' through the establishment of two grassland reserves outside the proposed Urban Growth Boundary.

But when you're down to the last 5% the time for offsets, for picking and choosing what will be saved, is over. It is not time for a Sophie's Choice between areas to be saved and areas to be sacrificed; it's time to save the lot!

The Victorian National Parks Association has noted that the proposed extensions will impact on rare species such as the Southern Brown Bandicoot. I am disappointed that we have allowed once common species such as the Southern Brown Bandicoot to have their habitat assaulted to the point where saving them starts to feel like hard work. Sufficient of the habitat of native birds, plants, and animals should be protected so they do not become endangered in the first place. It is time for the habitat destruction to stop.

Second, the Urban Growth Boundary extension proposal represents a further breach into Melbourne's promised Green Wedges. In 2002 Melbourne 2030 invaded areas such as Epping North which had previously been set aside as Green Wedges. It promised the non-urban area outside the Urban Growth Boundary would be better protected. In 2005 the Urban Growth Boundary was again extended, removing 11,500 hectares from the Green Wedges. This was said to be enough for the next 25 years. The latest proposal suggests that none of the undertakings made about Green Wedges, undertakings going right back to 1967, can be relied on by Melbourne residents.

We need to retain Green Wedges as permanent wedges between growth corridors, not as potential urban land supply that is bulldozed as soon as there is a demand for it.

Third, expanding the Urban Growth Boundary will totally contradict the original 'Melbourne 2030' Plan. A lot of people of goodwill have supported 'Melbourne 2030', with its accompanying high rise, multi-unit developments, dual occupancies, and loss of community say over planning decisions, as preferable to urban sprawl. What they haven't realised is that it isn't halting any urban sprawl at all. Suburbs continue to march out onto the horizon. Property developers are having their cake and eating it too. We're growing upwards and outwards. Melbourne is becoming an obese, hardened-artery parody of its former self.

The extension of the growth zone means that the sacrificing of inner suburban quality of life has been in vain. We are cramping in the inner suburbs and we have urban sprawl as well. We will have more communities isolated from reliable transport services and highly car dependent, as well as clogged congested inner suburbs streets. I see the Treasury Secretary is suggesting we tackle this problem with a tax. Fabulous!

Fourth, expanding the Urban Growth Boundary is a consequence of Melbourne's rapidly expanding population.

Like a man rapidly gaining weight who simply loosens his belt rather than confront his weight problem, Melbourne needs to ask itself, is a population of 5 million really going to give us a better city than one of 4 million? We are now growing by 75,000 people every year, 1500 every week, over 200 every day. This is pushing up housing prices and making housing unaffordable for the young, putting pressure on scarce water supplies, leading to water restrictions and water price hikes, increasing traffic congestion and increasing our carbon emissions.

Accepting galloping population increase as inevitable or even desirable, and encouraging urban sprawl, will lead to a more polluted, congested and unsustainable Melbourne. Melbourne is generating more greenhouse gas emissions, using more water, losing open space and turning into a high rise steel and concrete jungle. Planners and policy makers talk the talk of protecting Melbourne's environment, but their actions have the opposite effect. They behave as Gough Whitlam once described rowers – facing in one direction but heading in the opposite one.

We need an environmentally sustainable planning policy for Melbourne. We do not need more loss of open space, high rise buildings turning Melbourne into Shanghai or Mexico City, ever larger dwellings like the energy-guzzling McMansions, or policies which encourage reduced numbers of people per dwelling.

We must show the same foresight the founders of this city showed when it was initially designed. They left us with a city with open space, extensive tram and train networks, and liveable suburbs supported by extensive local infrastructure in the form of schools, hospitals and social services. We too should leave a legacy for future generations that we, and they, can be proud of.