THE METROPOLITAN PLANNING AUTHORITY:

THE TOOTHLESS TIGER

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[Class]

19/10/2015
PLAN MELBOURNE REFRESH

Introduction

Twenty three years ago a prominent urban planning academic declares “A fundamental reform of town planning for Victoria and Melbourne is needed” (McLoughlin, 1992.pg 248). His research highlighted a gaping disparity between strategic intent and the actual realities of metropolitan Melbourne development (Whitzman and Ryan, 2014). In the 60 years since the 1954 Melbourne Metropolitan Planning scheme was produced, arguably the last targeted effective strategic plan, Melbourne has played host to 21 separate strategic planning policy documents. The substance of these plans often amounts to little more than government lip service, a pretense for appearing proactive. Come 2014, Plan Melbourne is the latest attempt at forging a vision for the future of Melbourne. Section 7. Of the report, Implementation: Delivering better governance, appears to be an attempt to add fortify the pages of grand visions by “achieving clear results and deliver outcomes through better governance, planning, regulation and funding mechanisms”. In particular the establishment of a new agency, The Metropolitan Planning Authority, to implement the plan and “streamline planning” appeared to first step towards acknowledging the democratic and governance issues that have long plagued planning in this city (Whitzman and Ryan, 2014). In reality however, the MPA is a toothless tiger, another level of governance in an already over governed field. The following report will highlight some of the key issues with the implementation strategy of Plan Melbourne, specifically with the effectiveness of the Metropolitan Planning Authority, and make recommendations for submission to the Plan Melbourne refresh in the hopes of rectifying some of the major flaws the document faces to provide Melbourne with an effective strategic framework into the future.
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The Issues
At the core everything that is wrong with the current format of the Metropolitan Planning Authority is its purpose, it is charged with implementing Plan Melbourne, not planning Melbourne. The Agency lacks any clear mandate or authority to drive planning decisions for the city, it lacks an infrastructure budget, the board is not democratically elected from public representatives nor does it incorporate members of other essential services departments, and as Plan Melbourne fails to set any actualized targets it effectively leaves the agency working towards any specified and measurable goals.

Lack of Mandate
Melbourne at present does not have an executive body who is responsible for providing independent, unbiased leadership of matters of planning significance (Milner, 2014). This raised particular concern when designing plans to be implemented at a metropolitan scale. At present planning decisions are driven by the three levels of government, the community and the private sector (Milner, 2014), this poses a serious risk to the success of any broad reaching metropolitan strategy. Expecting local councils to implement broad reaching initiatives for the betterment of the metropolitan region as a whole is futile when at essence local councils are there to protect the interests of local stakeholders (Spiller, 2005). The Greater London Authority provides an example of a mandated executive body responsible for coordinating common metropolitan strategy. The Authority sets strategic planning principles under the London Plan and economic development goals that benefit the broader metropolitan region and steers the direction of local government infrastructure and development (Zimmerman and Association, 2003).
Lack of Budget
Infrastructure investment and economic strategies are imperative to the success of any strategic plan (Tomlinson, 2013). How then, the Metropolitan Planning Authority is supposed to be responsible for overseeing the implementation of Plan Melbourne without an infrastructure budget raises some questions. Cities around the world that have successful long running strategic plans are overseen by authorities that have clear financed resources at their disposal. The Portland Development Council, the agency responsible for implementing The Portland Plan in Portland, Oregon, had an operational budget of $8 billion in 2011 (PDC, 2012), likewise the Greater London Authority had an infrastructure and services budget of £11 Billion last operating year (Zimmerman and Association, 2003).

Representation
The ability to successfully implement such a broad reaching strategic plan on such a large metropolitan area would require large scale collaboration beyond what Melbourne has seen (Sullivan et al., 2013). Many submissions to the original Plan Melbourne draft called for the agency to be made up of elected representatives from the five new development areas and representatives of the major infrastructure and services departments. Opening the agency to this level of independent representation and collaboration had the opportunity to strengthen the democratic accountability, showcase and streamline efficiency between departments and provide a renewed legitimacy to the planning process (Gleeson et al., 2012). Instead the non-elected body of the Metropolitan Planning Authority limits transparency, and accountability and has the potential to highlight the inability of planning to priorities public priorities over vested interest. (Gleeson et al., 2012).
Lack of measurable targets

As with the entire implementation section of Plan Melbourne, there is a complete absence of measurable, timed targets. How is an agency supposed to measure success and progress if it doesn’t have a defined goal to achieve? The Portland Plan sets out clear and precise 5 and 25 year targets that the overseeing agency strives to achieve (PDC, 2012). The London Authority also works to set budgetary and infrastructure targets. Without measurable, realistic targets how can an agency justify its expense to taxpayers?

Successful metropolitan strategic planning requires strong leadership and clarity of purpose (Milner, 2014), the lack of jurisdiction for the Metropolitan Planning Authority and the failure to provide it with an infrastructure budget effectively renders it a mere interpreter of the plan, these interpretations constantly swayed by the political aspirations of the ruling party, local council angst and the financial outcomes of developers (Whitzman and Ryan, 2014).

Recommendations

The idea of the Metropolitan Planning Authority is not necessarily a bad one, at first glance the presence of an integrated department acting as overseer to Plan Melbourne’s success seems like a step in the right direction towards truly progressive and accountable planning. In Reality however, the authority lacks any of the substance required of a governing body to implement the changes required in large strategic planning documents and to justify its $6 million plus cost to taxpayers last financial year. The following recommendations to the Plan Melbourne refresh aim to further strengthen the future role
of the Metropolitan Planning Authority and solidify its role as an efficient and progressive force in the future direction of Melbourne.

1. Provide a legislated mandate to the Metropolitan Planning Authority. Plan Melbourne is a large strategic document designed to be carried out over many years. Providing the metropolitan Planning Authority with a clear and mandated role in the future delivery of Plan Melbourne will potentially depoliticize the agency and the planning process and remove the risks of Plan Melbourne falling victim to the next political cycle. A mandated authority will have the power to drive and coordinate a shared vision at a metropolitan scale that is require in order for large strategic plans to be truly successful.

2. Provide the Metropolitan Planning Authority with the financial means and authority to implement and drive infrastructure planning and development. The Metropolitan Planning Authority is perfectly placed to identify and develop targeted infrastructure investment in a strategic and timely manner to ensure the future success of Plan Melbourne. The development of a new infrastructure agency recently wholly separate from the Metropolitan Planning Authority to “drive in investment projects now and into the future”, seems to add another inefficient level of beauracray to an already overcrowded sphere. The Metropolitan Planning Authority would be perfectly placed to source and direct major infrastructure projects now and into the future in alliance with Plan Melbourne and its strategic objectives.

3. Make the MPA a truly collaborative democratic agency. The establishment of the five development sub regions in the Melbourne metropolitan area was a step in
the right direction for further streamlining and aligning regional priorities. Integrating representation of these regions via elected officials into the Metropolitan Planning Authority would democratically reinforce the mandate provided to the agency and in turn aid in increasing public acceptance of Plan Melbourne and its objectives.

4. Develop measurable, realistic targets in both short and long term cycles. Sharing a defined common goal provides direction and purpose. Plan Melbourne at present lacks any clear targets or timed infrastructure plans, essentially making it a wordy narrative of what could be done rather than what will be done. One only wonders how efficiency and productivity is measured when there are no set targets to strive to achieve. Creating short 1-5 year plans and targets in conjunction with larger 25+ year plans and targets would help drive investment, accountability and measurable outcomes for the Metropolitan Planning Authority.

Plan Melbourne has the potential to shape the future of a city that is in desperate need of direction and clear vision. The unparalleled growth that the city will see in the coming years will present some major challenges for both its residents and its governing bodies. The establishment of the Metropolitan Planning Authority as an Implementation agency for Plan Melbourne had the potential to align state government, local government and private interest under a shared vision at a truly metropolitan scale. The agency however has appeared to be little more than a rebrand of the previous Growth Areas Authority, negated of any true authority to produce any real change. However the refresh holds new opportunities for Plan Melbourne to become a document that will shape the city long into
the future. With changes such as legislating a clear mandate, equipping the agency with a defined budget, increasing representational democracy and establishing measureable targets, the Metropolitan Planning Authority could become an empowered effective force in Melbourne and Victoria’s strategic planning future.