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RHETORIC OR REALITY: THE FUTURE OF OUR CITIES

■ Tony Recsei

In the June 2005 issue of People and Place Tony Recsei wrote a critique of the fashionable planning doctrine of urban consolidation. In the September issue Peter Newman wrote a response defending urban consolidation and arguing that Recsei's position was based on fear rather than reason. In the present article Recsei replies.

The thrust of my article 'Pipe dreams: the shortcomings of ideologically based planning'¹ was that a policy based on higher population densities is being imposed on protesting Australian communities without any substantiation being provided that this policy will benefit the larger community. I referred to the many downsides of high-density and suggested that future policy creation be evidence based.

My article triggered a response from Peter Newman entitled 'Pipe dreams and ideologues: values and planning',² a response that was surprising in two ways.

First, Newman's article specifically targets by name a community organisation called Save Our Suburbs (SOS), not once but many times. This is surprising, since the views I expressed were my own and not necessarily those of SOS. The SOS movement is represented by a number of separate community groups located in different cities in Australia. Furthermore, my article concerned 'new-urban' and 'smart-growth' doctrines in general and was not directed at any one doctrine in particular.

Second, Newman's article attempts to portray the individual points brought up in my article as value judgments, instead of as the fact-based arguments that were actually presented. This he does by using emotive language, with the word 'fear' occurring 30 times in his article.

I shall begin by summarising those areas where Newman and I appear to agree and then move on to discuss questions where our views remain in contrast.

PUBLIC TRANSPORT — SUBSTANTIAL AGREEMENT

In spite of Newman alleging that I have a 'fear of public transport'³ I believe that it has an important role to play in a large city. However I do not consider that high-density can be successfully imposed onto communities as a way of increasing public transport use. In existing cities the use of public transport can only be increased gradually by a raft of carefully considered measures aimed at improving the quality and utility of the service, combined with measures to charge motorists a portion of the total cost of their road use (such as with the London congestion tax that he mentions).

SATELLITE CITIES/ NEW ACTIVITY CENTRES — SUBSTANTIAL AGREEMENT

We agree that activity centres should be created and designed to maximise sustainability. However I disagree that such centres can be generally retrofitted onto existing communities. There is no evidence that such centres can be successfully superimposed over long-established diversified networks that have evolved over time to link homes,

jobs, and facilities in a large city. To accommodate an increasing population I advocate the establishment new satellite cities in greenfields locations.

HOUSING CHOICE

An example of Newman's approach is his assertion that 'SOS would want to abolish [the opportunity for higher density housing] altogether' and that 'SOS appear to want to prevent anyone from having [the] opportunity [to live in higher density housing] on moral grounds'.⁴ In fact both I and SOS support a diversity of housing types to accommodate people's varying requirements and have said nothing about abolishing high-density housing. What I did say was that the evidence points to there being no shortage of this type of housing.

Newman quotes figures from an SGS survey to indicate the demand for higher-density.⁵ These figures, when multiplied out, equate to only two per cent of owner occupiers preferring to move to medium or high density accommodation in a transit city (and ten per cent for renters). They indicate a lower demand for higher density living than the figure implied by me, based on 83 per cent of Australians preferring to live in single-residential accommodation.⁶

I pointed out that other housing surveys show that the demand for higher density accommodation is already being met without the necessity of any government interference. Moreover, changes to local zoning can be effected through local government elected by the community if a need for more high-density becomes apparent. Newman complains about the historical examples of high-density imposed by central governments that I provide (see his 'Fear of Stalinist-style government' heading).⁷ However in every country there seems to be a group of

people who wish to control, meddle and interfere in other people's lives. The New South Wales (NSW) Planning Department policy is to take away the planning powers of Councils in a dictatorial fashion unless Councils submit a plan to them that provides for recurring increases in residential density, irrespective of the characteristics of the council area or the desires of the inhabitants. Contrary to Newman's assurances ('The vast majority of Australian leafy suburbs will not be touched by the focus on activity centres'),⁸ the ultimate result of this policy is high-density overall.

GRAPH LINKING FUEL CONSUMPTION WITH DENSITY

In my article I pointed to misleading claims made by high-density advocates resulting from an alleged correlation between urban density and the energy used for transport.

Newman refers to what he terms his 'famous' graph linking transport energy with urban density.⁹ But correlation is not causation. Using data from the source on which Newman's original graph was based (a data source co-authored by him),¹⁰ I have reproduced this graph (see Figure 1) and can show a similar relationship linking transport energy and wealth (see Figure 2).

In this data source book and a subsequent version the authors specify a linear correlation between fuel consumption and density,¹¹ suggest an exponential relationship,¹² appear to illustrate a power relationship¹³ and specify a logarithmic relationship.¹⁴ One can choose functions that will best fit data to produce correlations and pleasing curves but to understand relationships it is important to use disaggregated data, control for self selection of respondents and have an underlying explanatory model.

Figure 1: Fuel and density

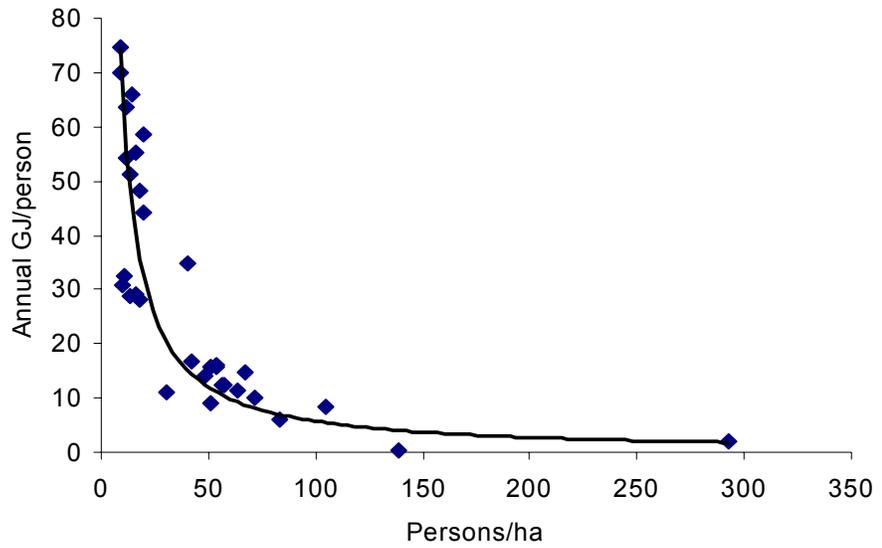
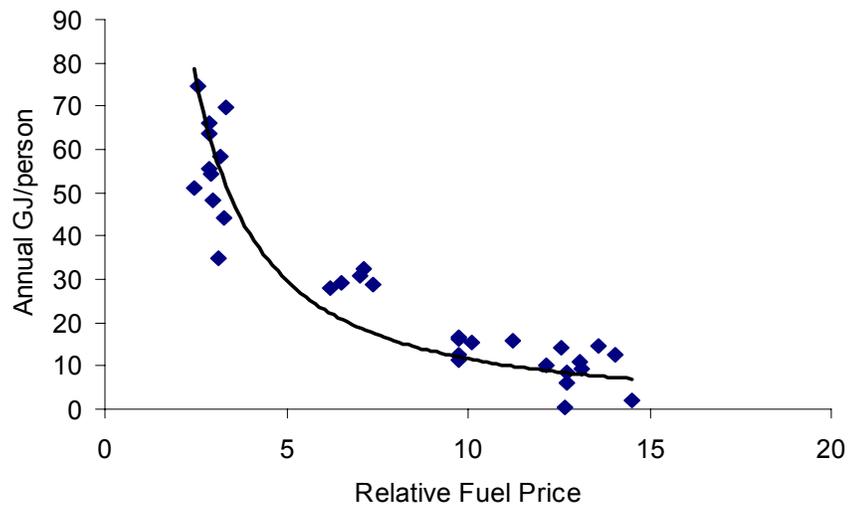


Figure 2: Fuel and Wealth



Relative fuel price = fuel cents per litre/family income \$ (both in US currency) adjusted for purchasing power parity *1000
Power function trendlines are depicted
Data from P. Newman and J Kenworthy, *Cities and automobile dependence. An international sourcebook*, Aldershot UK: Gower, 1989, pp. 36, 42 and 72

Summary of Figure 1 and 2 correlations

Relationship	Fuel and Density	Fuel and Wealth
Linear	-0.609	-0.923
	s<0.10	s<0.01
Log	-0.837	-0.944
	s<0.02	s<0.01
Power	-0.860	-0.789
	s<0.02	s<0.02
Exponential	-0.790	-0.814
	s<0.01	s<0.01

Note: the correlations between fuel and wealth are mostly higher than those between fuel and density

URBAN CENTRES

Newman refers to a table in his article comparing trends across Melbourne based on distance from the core.¹⁵ The table shows that higher density areas near the Melbourne CBD tend to be wealthier than lower density areas further away. People there also have fewer car trips. Newman implies that reduced car trips will also characterise his suggested high-density centres situated more towards the city fringe. As with the case linking fuel use and high-density, problems emerge when attempts are made to form conclusions in a multivariate environment.

Applicable variables are:

- Income
- Density
- Availability of car-competitive public transport
- Distance of destinations.

How does one know that it is density that is causing the reduced car trips in inner Melbourne? Land is higher-priced in or near the CBD resulting in properties being smaller (therefore higher density) and more expensive (unless rundown, which may well be their ultimate fate). Such properties obviously are likely to be occupied by those in higher income brackets and, to some extent, those who wish to travel frequently to the CBD. Diverging lines of public transport routes

radiate out from the CBD. These routes traverse the inner regions where they are still reasonably close together, so providing a superior service there. Congestion and parking problems in the CBD make travel by car too difficult for most journeys so people tend to prefer other means of transport.¹⁶

It does not follow that these inner area conditions can be replicated in centres distant from the CBD magnet. In my article I referred to Birrell et al.¹⁷ who show that, in Melbourne, the types of businesses likely to be attracted to growth centres are mainly retail, accommodation, cafes and restaurants. These represent only 19 per cent of jobs. Most other types of business need to be located in the CBD or, alternatively, have specific needs such as a large land area that preclude them both from the CBD and from high-density suburban centres. The Newman suburban centres will have to share such jobs as will be available, with only a small number of opportunities in each centre.

Further, Birrell et al. refer to studies indicating that workers do not have much interest in living close to their site of employment. In the US only 17.9 per cent of people give job location as a reason for their neighbourhood choice.¹⁸

It follows that people’s journeys from suburban centres are likely to be to destinations much more widely spread than is the case with inner city areas. As Newman acknowledges, you can’t build train lines linking everywhere to everywhere. Newman provides no data predicting the relative reduction of journeys after an activity centre has been imposed on an area compared to what previously would have been the case without such an imposition. The critical questions remain unanswered — how many additional jobs will the projected urban centres provide

that are not already in current municipal centres and how many car journeys will such a centre save?

NO EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL URBAN CENTRES POLICY

Scepticism about urban centres is warranted. As I mentioned, the only determined extensive attempt to implement a centres policy that I am aware of was the 1952 Markelius General Plan for Stockholm. This attempt ultimately collapsed — the planned relationship of homes to jobs did not materialise, the residents of the centres moved out to mainly single-residential dwellings and were replaced by social welfare recipients and migrants.¹⁹

What examples of success does Newman provide? He refers to two, Subi-Centro in Perth²⁰ and Vancouver.²¹

He points to a saving in vehicle kilometres travelled (VKT) resulting from the opening of the Subi-Centro urban village.²² I calculate this saving to be only 0.016 per cent of total VKT in Perth.²³ For a centre situated in such an optimal site near the CBD, such a micro reduction can by no stretch of the imagination be considered justification for a centres policy

Vancouver is Newman's second (and only other) example. He maintains Vancouver is showing reductions in car ownership and VKT.²⁴ The facts indicate the converse. Between 1999 and 2004 car ownership in Vancouver rose by 12.5 per cent (in spite of a 13 per cent increase in the provision of transit service hours).²⁵ Also, during this period the increase in the car share of total journeys has risen by four times that of the public transport while walking and bike trips have declined by an equivalent amount (see Table 1). If this is success one wonders how failure is defined.

Newman's response to repeated

requests for evidence of the effectiveness of urban centres is to allege that SOS has a 'fear of the urban centre'.²⁶

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Newman maintains that the centres policy improves social justice.²⁷ In fact, social equity is being adversely impacted by high-density policies. An investigation of housing costs reveals that world cities adopting high-density policies have the highest housing costs, with Sydney's being among the highest.²⁸ This is a consequence of a land shortage caused by the iron ring that the NSW Planning Department has erected around Sydney so as to enforce higher densities at the expense of greenfields development. Shortages result in higher prices. The consequential unaffordability hits young people the hardest, leaving many with the prospect of never being able to afford their own home. Discussing Sydney's housing affordability crisis, Prime Minister John Howard has called for 'more adventurous land release policies and rather more realistic development policies to be adopted by state and federal governments'.²⁹

SUSTAINABILITY

It is ironic that Newman maintains that 'sustainability issues are not taken seriously by Recsei'.³⁰ I pointed to the resulting adverse impacts on sustainability of razing viable single-residential dwellings to make way for high-density units. I referred to the waste of embodied energy in buildings, the increased operational energy demand in high-rises, more water pollution and the augmented life-threatening air pollution caused by the increase in traffic congestion and destruction of urban vegetation.³¹

In an extreme widespread high-density situation a decrease in transport energy

Table 1: Vancouver transport trends — mode trip share and car ownership

	Public Transport	Walk and Bike	Auto and Other*	Car Ownership
	Per cent			Number
1999	10.3	14.3	75.4	1,147,200
2004	10.8	11.7	77.5	1,290,600
Per cent Change	0.5	-2.6	2.1	12.5

* Other was 1.2 per cent in 1999, not given separately in 2004

Sources: Greater Vancouver Transportation Authority, *Sustainable Region Showcase for Greater Vancouver*, May 2003; *Recent Trends in Travel Characteristics: Analysis of the 2004 Greater Vancouver Trip Diary Survey*, June 2005

does result. In Hong Kong, with the world's highest density, per capita transport energy is reduced when compared with particularly low-density cities such as Avignon in France. However, these are extremes; there is little difference between, for example, Australian and European capital cities. Any advantage claimed for high-density needs to be balanced against the negatives. Australians need to ask themselves whether they wish to live under Hong Kong conditions. If not, Australian cities with imposed ineffective high-density centres will be neither fish nor fowl and are likely to suffer from all the ills of higher density without any significant reduction in car dependence.

Newman refers to a future oil shortage. In the past people have adapted to comparable challenges in ways that were not initially foreseeable. It is difficult to second-guess future circumstances and this limits preventative measures that can be undertaken now. Little harm can result from incorporating current sustainability-optimising practices in greenfield sites, such as for the satellite cities I suggest. It is quite another matter to force high-density policies onto unwilling communities under the guise of claiming to forestall an unclear oil crisis situation.

POPULATION

Newman refers to a fear of immigrants. The question is not immigrants as such, it

is population numbers. Anyone who is serious about sustainability must consider that any gains made in per capita sustainability at the individual level will be swiftly overtaken if the population increases. Population increases make additional demands on the environment due to increasing numbers and the requirement of extra people for an improved standard of living. Such questions of sustainability have to be tackled on a coordinated basis by all levels of world governments, from local government to international agencies.

CONCLUSION

Newman's patronising approach and his failure to substantiate his points provides further justification for the theme of my original article. This is that so-called 'smart-growth' policies are driven by ideology rather than knowledge. Idealistic intentions are no substitute for evidence-based policies. Newman's article concludes: 'Fear is a great motivator but a poor basis for decisions'. It is more pertinent to say: 'Ideology is a great motivator but a poor basis for decisions'.

References

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- ³ *ibid.* p. 46
- ⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 42-43
- ⁵ *ibid.* p. 41
- ⁶ Recsei, *op. cit.*, p. 76
- ⁷ Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 42
- ⁸ *ibid.* p. 50
- ⁹ *ibid.* p. 47
- ¹⁰ P. Newman and J. Kenworthy, *Cities and Automobile Dependence: An International Sourcebook*, Aldershot UK: Gower, 1989
- ¹¹ Newman, *op. cit.*, p. 45
- ¹² *ibid.*, p. 47
- ¹³ *ibid.*, p. 48
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- ³¹ Recsei, *op. cit.* pp 74, 75