

Let's look at real options to secure more housing

Paul Nicolaou



Housing supply and soaring rents are now a full-blown crisis with Sydney at its epicentre and Planning Minister Paul Scully knows it represents an existential threat for any government that fails to act.

The ability to put a roof over your head — purchased or rented — is fundamental in any well functioning and reasonably affordable society, especially in an otherwise wealthy one like ours.

Mr Scully is right to sound the alarm and say “beware NIMBY councils” standing in the path of efforts to create housing opportunities for the citizens of Sydney.

The best thing any government could do is to free up the planning rules, shorten the glacially slow development approval process and allow the private sector to get on with building thousands of much-needed homes.

It is not as though there is no solution in sight.

Sydney has three golden opportunities to dramatically increase housing supply in the form of Parramatta Road, Victoria Road and the Great Western Highway.

Each of these roads is crying out for

sensible development and is well suited to medium density housing of up to eight storeys complemented by innovative public transport solutions.

All three present opportunities to provide a mix of affordable housing to enable essential workers to live closer to where they work.

Parramatta Road is in decay and has defied all efforts to date to give it a viable future.

Medium density housing along its spine from the western fringe of the CBD to Granville with features such as a new light rail or trackless tram connection would bring people and businesses delivering economic viability.

Victoria Road is Sydney's longest main road and it too is tailor-made for medium density housing along its length.

Market forces are already at work to some extent with examples of medium-height apartment buildings in Drummoyne and at Parramatta. More are needed.

The Great Western Highway heading west from Parramatta is another perfect candidate for apartment dwellings.

It is already served by a heavy rail corridor and has a mixture of undeveloped or underdeveloped properties that would be suitable.

In so many ways, the housing crisis is the product of a cumbersome planning process and a development approval system, which, to be kind, is klunky. Try infuriatingly slow.

Think about it. Sydney has 35 local councils and 1200 councillors. Thirty-five. That's 35 potential barriers to

sensible housing developments that can take years to be approved, if at all.

Brisbane, where development approvals can take just months, has one council covering the expanse of its huge metropolitan area. Unfortunately, extensive council amalgamation in Sydney has defied both sides of politics in NSW.

So, let's look across the Tasman. Auckland City Council, another local government area with a large footprint, years ago upgraded the zoning of large swathes of residential land previously limited to single dwellings with the express goal of increasing housing stock.

Auckland's zoning regime allowed for terraces and apartment buildings of up to five storeys. We shouldn't be too proud to learn a thing or two from our Kiwi mates.

Our own political leaders — federal and state — have already shown they're not intending to become hostages to political misfortune because of a failure to act on the housing crisis.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese

has an ambitious plan to build one million new homes in Australia within a five-year period, complicated by his plans for a \$10 billion housing fund being stuck in the Senate.

NSW Premier Chris Minns wants to build “up” to contain Sydney's unsustainable urban spread.

We suggest making it “up” and “along” Parramatta Road, Victoria Road and the Great Western Highway to add thousands of housing units with a mix of social and affordable dwellings.

But the overall message is to let business get on with the business of building. Let business start building a range of medium density housing options. It could be useful to have approved templates of attractive building designs that could help speed the approval process.

“Template” design has long been a feature of Sydney housing. Some of our city's most popular suburbs have attractive housing of a similar type because there was once a catalogue approach to choosing new homes.

Minister Paul Scully's intervention in the housing crisis and his willingness to override NIMBY councils is a positive sign of resolute action to follow.

Like most political leaders, Mr Scully would be aware of former US House Leader Tip O'Neill's famous exhortation that “all politics is local”.

And as Sydney is experiencing, there is nothing more “local” than a housing crisis and the clamour for something to be done about it.

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