

Talking Point: Leave Hobart's big planning decisions with council

BRIAN CORR: Steer clear of planning authorities that don't represent the people

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HOBART alderman Marti Zucco calls for “an independent planning authority so that Hobart planning decisions are not held to ransom by political interference” (Mercury, February 29).

Alderman Simon Behrakis calls for a change in how planning applications are assessed by taking larger decisions away from council (Mercury, January 23).

The City of Hobart's planning staff are highly professional and make recommendations to council that comply with the planning schemes. The council is obliged to agree with their officers, unless there are good planning grounds. This is how it should be.

In the past couple of years, some developers have submitted development applications that push the boundaries way too far, the officers have recommended refusal, and council has refused. Some developers have then trotted off to the appeals tribunal and been refused there as well. The proposed Welcome Stranger development is a good example, as is the proposed hospital in New Town.

While these few high-rise, high-profile cases are in the news, hundreds of “normal” applications are being quietly processed and approved.

The system works well and would be perfect if a few developers didn't push the boundaries so much.

Ald Zucco's claim that planning decisions are "held to ransom by political interference" is not supported by any evidence.

Ald Behrakis's call to take larger decisions away from council has been tried in some other states. I have experience of this in Western Australia. Over there, many councils and communities are deeply dissatisfied with these Development Assessment Panels (DAPs).

In WA, each DAP has three technical experts and two council members; three against two. The three are not elected, but each has the same voting power as each of the two. One of the three always holds the chair so has the casting vote when a decision is evenly split (if only four are present). This gives the impression of democracy. It's been described as three wolves and two lambs voting on what's for lunch.

The DAP regulations ban the council members from taking into account the opinion of their councils, or their residents, effectively directing them not to bring to the meeting their local knowledge. Council planning staff still prepare their report, a report that goes to the DAP with no council involvement.

So, WA has a number of industry-biased, unelected, undemocratic DAPs making decisions where the council members are not allowed to represent their council or their residents. The local planning schemes have so much discretion that the DAPs can approve anything.

If the council tried to wield the same discretionary powers, there could be a price to pay in the next election. For the industry-biased, unelected, and therefore untouchable DAPs, there is no such fear of a community backlash. They don't have to worry, and that makes for a very dangerously undemocratic, and easily corruptible system.

The solution is to keep the community interest at the centre of the system, and leave the decision-making to those who are accountable to the people – that is the council, supported by the city's planning staff who are professional experts, preparing reports that can be trusted.

Ald Zucco and Behrakis should trust their officers and remember they were elected to make decisions on behalf of the people.

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