PIA Submission to the Sydney City Council on “Sustainable Sydney 2030”

PIA strongly supports thorough and sound strategic planning that is based on research and consultation with stakeholders, and in using this to stimulate debate and formulate the necessary action plans, directions and statutory instruments arising.

Council’s “Sydney 2030” document is refreshingly and broad in its scope and undertaking. It is also clear in terms of many of the performance indicators and sustainability deliverables although the international Best Practice experience of other cities suggests some of these targets are ambitious.

1.0 THE THREE KEY PRINCIPLES

PIA generally supports the broad direction that these principles set.

1.1 A Global City.

The Strategy seeks to place Sydney among key global players. This will require strong collaboration between the City, the State and Federal Governments, neighbouring Councils and Industry who all depend on the global status and sustainable future of Sydney. To be a truly Global City, will require a considerable degree of shared commitment to definite action and investment from these key stakeholders. We believe that the 2030 document is a good first step in setting a clear agenda, invoking informed debate and providing a suitable policy framework for future decision-making and project evaluation.

The next challenge for the City is to articulate the specifics, details and how Sydney can achieve and maintain its Global status, beyond the recognition of certain ‘icons,’ and being a tourist destination. This includes the promotion of global businesses, financial centres, telecommunication networks, government agencies, educational and cultural institutions with international functions and other enterprises that will have an interest in securing Sydney’s position as a leading recognised centre within our region for global activities. This may also include genuinely “global” institutions as well.

1.2 A Green City.

We are pleased to see the City taking a serious stand on long-term sustainability, and seeking to be a leader in this essential area. We welcome the many initiatives that have been proposed, and acknowledge that they need more work in terms of their detailed viability. We congratulate the City for being one of the first to suggest Combined Cooling, Heat and Power Plants for Australia, and note that they have long been used and are well tested internationally. The Institute sees the opportunity for other Councils and cities supporting investment in sustainable utilities by learning from and employing the Sydney City experience, and long-standing International experience.

As with the other strategies to reduce energy demand and carbon production, we are encouraged by Sydney City’s apparent recognition of the importance of sharing the experience of other Global Cities. Many other cities have taken major stands in reducing their carbon footprint, and thus learnt many hard lessons that Sydney could benefit from. Clear targets that are achievable but stretch the standards for sustainability should become key components of a Green City principle.
The Institute would urge Council to critically analyse the targets to ensure that technology and industry are capable of delivering results. Similarly, efforts should be made to promote and showcase the ‘success stories’ from other cities and from companies that are pushing the envelope, both here and overseas, to reach high standards of sustainability in terms of building design and operation, industrial activities, and human behaviour or culture.

We support the City and its direction. We look forward to seeing this worked through in greater detail. PIA and its members have links with many of other cities, and is happy to assist the City by identifying possible international models and nominating examples of sustainable planning or buildings to showcase.

1.3 A Connected City.

We congratulate the City of Sydney on commissioning Jan Gehl to look at Sydney, and develop ideas and solutions for the future of a pedestrian based city. PIA is aware of the results of cities that have systematically and progressively implemented Jan Gehl’s recommendations, and the significant changes and benefits that these have brought to such cities as Melbourne and Stockholm. We urge the City to adopt Jan Gehl’s recommendations in full, and to avoid ‘cherry-picking’ ideas.

We are pleased to see the city being proactive on bicycles and public transport. This is an area where Sydney as a whole as been languishing for much longer than it should have. We support the City in its endeavours to promote a greater consensus across the Metropolitan area for improved facilities and infrastructure for both bicycles and public transport. This is essential if such initiatives are to have real impact at the broader level. As arguably the most important local government area in Metropolitan Sydney, the City of Sydney has a larger role in promoting ideas and influencing change.

2.0 SYDNEY IN ITS METRO CONTEXT.

It is recognised that Sydney is looking to achieve its housing and employment targets from the State Government’s sub-regional strategies. The current 2030 Strategy needs to be extended to clearly indicate where and how future growth identified in the sub-regional strategy will occur. This needs to be exclusive of any net additional space provided in the ‘major projects’ (such as at Central Station, Darling Harbour etc) that may or may not be feasible. A clear plan is essential for forward planning, private sector and public investment and delivery of services to meet future demands.

Likewise, with employment, it is important for the community and the private sector to understand how, where and what type of employment will be targeted, and how the intense concentration benefits wider Sydney (when it may increase the need for and/or environmental cost of travel across the region). The broader metropolitan implications need to be considered and taken into account. Would the city consider surrendering some employment growth to other centres to improve the travel/carbon profile of the journey to work across Sydney?

The Institute is investigating the concept of accommodating growth outside of the metropolitan area to reduce pressure on the metropolitan area for increased densities as well as to support revitalisation of regional areas experiencing decline or structural change. The concept is similar to the eco-town model being developed in the UK and other countries. The Institute would suggest there may be merit in Sydney City supporting growth in its employment and housing base by thinking beyond the spatial confines of the Sydney LGA with the possibility of direct telecommuting and transport with specially linked or “connected” satellite cities. We would be happy to discuss this concept further with you.
We consider that Metropolitan Sydney needs greater co-operation across the region between Local Authorities. A visionary plan like Sydney’s will have wider impacts, and thus the City needs to engage with the Councils immediately around it, and those affected by the proposed new transport links, in collaboration with the State Government.

3.0 STRATEGIC ISSUES.

The Strategy raises many Strategic Issues, which no doubt will be resolved in the next stage of developing and implementing the vision.

At briefings and the public launch of the Strategy Council’s consultants noted the importance of literally and figuratively ‘drawing lines’ on paper to create and communicate the Vision. We note from a planning perspective, that each line has spatial, relational and connectivity issues, and thus a line should be carefully drawn and considered. The Structural Logic of the City is created by the network of lines (streets and transport lines) that make up the City, and we are concerned about the level of analysis of the implications of these in a functional sense. We recognise that the functionality of cities is very complex. However the implications for centres and places cannot be properly understood without such a structural and spatial analysis. It is important that a well founded spatial understanding is developed so that the various options can be tested as part of the analysis, to identify the ‘best fit’ solution for any place, and thereby giving it the best chance of success.

We note the Big Ideas are included in the 2030 Strategy as ‘generators’ of discussion. One of those ideas is the possible removal of the Exhibition Centre from Darling Harbour, and its potential placement at the redeveloped Central. M.I.C.E. (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) are a major global force in travel and tourism. From some of our members’ experiences overseas, they are aware that Sydney’s quality as a MICE destination is the fact that the Exhibition Centre is linked to the Conference Centre and is near the Harbour. We would urge the Council is to carefully consider the wider implications of replacing the Exhibition Centre with “city blocks.” In addition, in an age when Global Cities are increasing their capacity for Conferences and Exhibition space, there should be capacity for expansion of such facilities as part of a mixed use redevelopment.

These two points raise a broader concern, in that the strategy appears to be project led, or object oriented, rather than based more adaptively within an enabling context or detailed spatial framework for decision-making. As mentioned, in order for the Strategy to succeed, which we hope it will, there needs to be a strong underlying functional and spatial basis, that informs where development initiatives are placed and how they interact with their existing context as places of activity. Thus rather than the Big Ideas being generators of place, the spatial context and ideas together need to inform the best approach for a place. The planning strategy needs to facilitate the best solution for a place rather than prescribe one possible outcome.

4.0 THE FIVE BIG MOVES

Each of these has many ideas that deserve greater consideration. PIA supports all of these in principle, and highlights some concerns about some of the potential directions.

4.1 Revitalised Heart.

We fully support this initiative, and urge the City to adopt Jan Gehl’s recommendations where possible, as a starting position to achieve this. The ten initiatives show promise, but we urge the City to consider the structural logic of the positioning of each node, (civic, green and economic), and the nature of the connections between them.
4.2. Integrated Transport.

We fully support this initiative. Again, we urge the City to work with the Transport agencies and to consider the structural logic of the positioning of each node on the transport routes, the nature of each transport route and how it connects the city and the metropolitan region spatially and temporally, and whether the key interchange places serve the city best. Of particular concern is how the city streets can accommodate the competing demands of cars (even if they are diminished in the City), the anticipated significant increase in bus transport in the immediate future (pending any real expansion of the rail or new metro rail networks) as well any light rail.

We also urge the City to consider the nature of the linkages, connections and relationships that the Public Transport and Green Networks create. Do these routes make spatial sense in how people do and will use the city? Remembering that pedestrians will always take the shortest and easiest route somewhere, rather than an indirect green one. Cities rely on transport that links destinations to people along the desire lines they want, not those that governments choose.

Also, we re-iterate that the City needs to help create more of a consensus across broader Metropolitan Sydney for bicycles and public transport, as it is only at this broader level that real impact will felt.

4.3 Green Network.

This initiative to be applauded. As mentioned above the nature of the networks need to be carefully considered at the next stage of the work. Their role and function in the spatial structure of the city needs to be considered, and they should integrate with the surrounding local government areas. Thus we urge the Council to work with the surrounding Councils on this.

4.4 Activity Hubs

We congratulate the City on reinforcing the traditional activity hubs of Sydney. We urge the City to consider the small centres, the mixed use areas, so that activity is not solely concentrated in a few places, but the benefits to the wider community are spread across Sydney.

We heard and to some extent share the concerns Jan Gehl voiced about Barangaroo. We hope that the City can work with the State Government to achieve a ‘leading Global City’ sustainable development in this location, one that will mitigate these concerns. A high level of public transport access, possibly a Metro Station, is required, to serve both the employment uses as well as the public parklands at minimum.

4.5 Transformative Development.

We are aware that these designated areas cover a large area within the City, and could substantially transform the City for the better. Again, we recommend that the City develop these ideas with further consideration of the structural logic of the positioning of each project, and the nature of the connections between them and the wider city, and what implications this could have for the project, and the areas immediately around the project and the City generally.

5.0 TEN TARGETS FOR 2030

PIA supports these targets in principle. We note that many other targets could have been chosen, and thus wonder how and why these particular targets were chosen, and whether they are necessarily the best measures for Sydney 2030.

5.1 Greenhouse Gas, Energy & Water (Targets 1 & 2)
From our knowledge of other Cities looking at reducing their greenhouse gas levels, and managing their own energy production these are very ambitious targets, given that the City has not really started much action, and has so little control over utilities, unlike other leading Cities. While we support the ambitious targets, we urge the City to talk to other Cities who have been dealing with greenhouse gas reduction for as long as 20 years now. Many European cities and some American cities have real, practical experience. In many cases they have control over local utilities, which enable them to do things that may not make the best sense financially, even though from a greenhouse gas or energy management perspective it may make perfect sense.

We believe that the Water target is more achievable, but will require vigilant attention and monitoring. We note, for example, the innovation proposed at No.1 Bligh Street, in terms of black/grey water mining and recycling. When this is multiplied across the entire city, and if all buildings undertook this recycling initiative, then the city wide water minimisation target may still not be achieved. Whilst a new source of water is accessed to help satisfy demand, the demand itself not significantly reduced.

5.3 Dwellings

We look forward to seeing how this will be achieved, particularly for a greater diversity of housing, with more affordable housing, that meets the housing needs of the current and future demographics of Sydney. The Institute is particularly mindful of the necessity of making provision for groups that are culturally or economically distinctive who are unable to compete in the Sydney housing market. These groups require special planning measures to enable them to compete and sustain their ability to secure housing close to transport shops and services. Merely increasing supply is not considered a sufficient policy response.

5.4 Employment

We note our concerns, mentioned previously, about the need to spread employment more widely in the Metropolitan Area, and more widely in the City itself across a diversity of employment categories, subject to transport access.

5.5 Transport

We note that this will need to be actioned in cooperation with the State Government and other LGA’s across the metropolitan area and beyond.

5.6 Walking/Cycling

We have indicated our support for Jan Gehl’s recommendations to make this happen. We also recommend that Sydney looks to other cities that have strong reputations for walking and cycling, and seeks to learn from them, and how they have achieved their success.

5.7 10 minute catchments

We urge the City to carefully consider the densities that will be needed to support these facilities and the impact that will have on the city, as that would imply many more centres than just the activity nodes with the facilities mentioned.

5.8 Green Links

We fully support this goal. As mentioned above the nature of the networks need to be carefully considered at the next stage of the work. Their role and function in the spatial structure of the city needs to be considered, and they should integrate with the surrounding Municipalities, and thus we would urge the Council to work with the surrounding Councils on this.
5.9. Community Cohesion.

We fully support this goal. But is this the best community target? Cohesion takes many forms and there are many aspirations across a city as to what is expected or desired from a community. The diversity of communities across the villages and suburbs of the Sydney LGA is respected by the City and this should be a key plank for actions to promote cohesion, whilst recognising the importance of diversity.

6.0 SPECIFIC DIRECTIONS, OBJECTIVES AND ACTIONS

PIA supports in principle these directions, objectives and actions. While we acknowledged that the directions and objectives should remain general, we are concerned that many of the actions are perhaps too general and ‘motherhood’ in nature, and in themselves require more detail.

The City, however, is to be congratulated for the large amount of work that has been undertaken in creating this Strategy, and for its commitment to a systematic approach to planning for environmental, economic and community sustainability.