

The federal government's [Smart Cities Plan](#) is framed around the “[30-minute city](#)”. In this city, journeys will [take no more than half an hour](#), regardless of your location.

The recently released plan has significant implications for population, transport provision and land-use intensity in neighbourhoods – the places where people live and how they get around. The realisation of its goals will require ongoing densification of Australian suburbs.

Cities with more houses, more people, more NIMBYs

The doubling of the population in some Australian cities by 2045 is likely to generate fierce opposition to housing and transport projects.

Many medium-density housing projects prompt residents [to act strategically to protect their neighbourhoods](#), even when these projects improve housing affordability and access to jobs and services.

Resistance is also directed at major infrastructure. Fierce campaigns are being (or have been) waged against Melbourne's [“sky rail” project](#) and [East West Link](#), Sydney's [AN ZAC Parade light rail](#) and [Westconnex](#) projects, and the [Perth Freight Link](#).

Such opposition is not only felt through the planning system. Residents also [use political channels](#) to stop projects, [as with the East West Link](#).

How should government respond to community resistance?

Contestation over city planning should not be shut down. Rather, we need to think about citizen opposition as a constructive process for working through difference. Here are five points to consider when including people in the delivery of the 30-minute city.

Point 1: We need active governments and active citizens

Private-sector lobbyists argue government is poorly placed to deliver small- and large-scale infrastructure. But think about a city with no roads, sewers, hospitals or schools. Without government-led planning, our cities would be dysfunctional places to live.

However, governments are not benevolent institutions. Active citizenries have long scrutinised the efficacy of government decisions.

The introduction of private and non-government infrastructure providers [further complicates](#) the relationship between citizens and governments. Whose interests does urban development then serve – a local community, regional community, or developers?

Governments need to be ready to answer questions about the role of the private sector and to change their plans following [community input](#).

Point 2: More than finding better participation tools

Urban planning systems play important roles in engaging residents. However, community consultation has been sporadic. Neighbourhood meetings and letterbox notifications often fail to ignite engagement.

Then there is the question of representation. Community consultations attract the “usual suspects”. Time-poor working-age households and young professionals find it difficult to fit engagement with planning into their busy lives. Even more rarely does planning engage with youth and children about their visions and hopes for cities.

Local and state governments are aware of the need for new ways to bring citizens into decision-making. Infrastructure Victoria's [citizen jury panels](#) are meeting mid-2016. Social media is also being considered as a way to [engage a broader public about city futures](#).

However, when planning departments use social media the uptake by communities is poor. Our research suggests [opponents to planned projects](#), rather than planning departments, are more likely to use social media.

The problem with current participation tools is their failure to account for conversations, debates and protests that [take place outside](#) the formal planning process. We need ways to include these discussions.

Point 3: Moving beyond NIMBYism

Not all community campaigns are the same. The dominant narrative around community participation in urban planning centres on the pejorative idea of "the [NIMBY](#)" (not in my backyard).

The term NIMBY is frequently used to delegitimise the claims of citizens opposing planned developments. They are characterised as self-interested residents who resist the inclusion of new social groups in their neighbourhoods, or any change to the built or natural environment.

Deliberately labelling these residents as self-interested fails to recognise the positive roles they can play. Local resident campaigns can focus on city-wide or local issues. They can range from [unwavering opposition to more flexible and reflexive engagement](#) in an urban discussion.

Some community campaigns might be viewed as vital forms of urban citizenship. Others are seen as "protecting their patch" against the best interests of the broader citizenry. Both views should be part of our discussion about city planning.

Point 4: The conversation never stops

An active citizenry is involved in short-term “one-off” planning and long-term strategic planning. Too often, public participation roles are confined to one end of this spectrum. For example, the NSW government recently attempted to [limit public participation](#) to high-level strategic planning documents, reducing community input into individual developments.

Most people have little knowledge of the urban planning system. A [recent study](#) found only 24% of Sydney residents surveyed were aware of the [Sydney metropolitan plan](#)

- . Confining participation to upfront strategic consultation limits community involvement.

For most people, engagement with planning and development issues will be reactionary. People engage with the planning system when a development is proposed for their area.

However, a recent national survey revealed that 65% of responses believed urban residents should be involved in each stage of the strategy-making process. Most will not be involved, but options for participation should not be confined to upfront consultation.

By engaging the community in an ongoing discussion we can listen and respond to local interests without compromising the broader strategic and long-term vision for our cities.

Point 5: Metropolitan-wide but locally situated debate

There will be winners and losers in the 30-minute city. Houses will be acquired, buildings will be demolished and sections of the natural environment will make way for new infrastructure.

Over the last decade, the idea of consensus has dominated participatory approaches. However, consensus-seeking is not always the best way to work through community disagreement. In some cases, consensus can be manipulative, or useful for mobilising resident opposition.

'30-minute city'? Not in my backyard! Smart Cities Plan must let people have their say

Written by The Conversation USA

We need to recognise that cities are home to many different people who hold diverse views and values, and who will not always agree. Rather than aiming for consensus, we should set our sights on metropolitan-wide, locally situated debate, which supports an active citizenry.

In the end, the difference between no action and implementation may be in “agreeing to disagree” through open discussion about the planning of the city.

This article draws on research by the authors and recent discussions about a possible crisis of participation in Australian cities at a [symposium in Sydney in April 2016](#).

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