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THE STATE PLANNING COMMISSION

Conflicted Interests? Transparency? Accountability?

The SA State Planning Commission (SPC) was established in April 2017 as the, nominally independent, principal planning and administrative body for the *Planning, Development and Infrastructure Act (2016)*.

Three of the four current Members have links to the development industry. The Chair is associated with a development company, Housing Choices Australia, which has building interests in Adelaide, and is a client of the South Australian Government.

Understandably, there is an inherent public perception of conflict of interest in a system where developers dictate and monitor planning policy with such widespread implications for the wellbeing and lived amenity of all South Australians.

The property, building and development industries seem to have had an inordinate influence on the development of the draft Planning and Design Code, so it is no surprise that the Code favours their interests over those of other concerned stakeholders and local communities.

The Urban Development Institute of Australia (UDIA) has been front and centre in offering advice and courtesies to the Planning Minister, the SPC and the planning department. This peak development industry body provided the blueprint for the Code. It also brokered and fostered a study group tour of the UK involving government and industry representatives.

Even more insidious was the caution delivered by the UDIA to the SPC ‘.....that the Community Engagement Charter should not be relied on too heavily’..... in promoting community understanding of the new planning system. And this biased advice came from the Chair of the UDIA’s Infill Development and Urban Renewal Committee, himself a member of the SPC.

The transparency of the SPC can be called into question by an analysis of the status of agenda items in its meetings, particularly during the tenure of the current Chair.

Under the first Chair of the SPC (to August 2018) 17% of agenda items were designated as confidential. Under the current Chair (from October 2018 to present) this figure is 50%, and an alarming 63% this year.

It is hard to believe that two-thirds of SPC business is ‘commercial in confidence’, but, indeed, if that is the case, it raises questions about the major emphasis on private development and commercial interests in the planning system, at the expense of the rights of the community at large.

Looking back on this, so-called, planning reform, it has been a catalogue of bad policy, made worse by an attenuated, complicated and expensive process of system development and implementation that has bypassed the Community Engagement Charter. Worse still, the oversight of the Planning and Design Code has been tainted by concerns about conflicted interests, transparency and a lack of public accountability.

It is time for some independent scrutiny of the State Planning Commission and its growing secrecy and lack of transparency.

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